

The Independent

Vol. 26, No. 1

Autumn 2020

A VERMONT CENTER FOR INDEPENDENT LIVING
PUBLICATION FOR
ELDERS AND PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

THE INDEPENDENT
c/o VCIL
11 EAST STATE ST
MONTPELIER, VT 05602

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Sharing the Journey

In March, our shared world suddenly changed. Throughout the United States and the larger world, we found ourselves facing a public health emergency. In Vermont it came surrounded by a rising awareness that Black Lives must matter here in this state and the sudden realization that our health, the health of our environment and the health of our democracy are closely linked.

Six months after the pandemic began, we are now heading into an early and uncertain autumn. Vermont is a safer place than many other places, but the ongoing impact of this pandemic is significant and still unfolding. It continues to expose fault lines in our state and in our nation. And it is forcing many of us to stop to consider who we are: making us reach deep for our personal and shared roots, to find our way into a democracy we must repair together. Early in this complex crisis, someone remarked that we are all in the same boat now. Then someone said that we are in different boats in a shared storm. This seems like the truer statement: Our task is to bring all the people in different boats through the storm to a common landing, a place where we all belong and are equally recognized and honored. ~ *Deborah Lisi-Baker, Co-Editor*



VCIL Executive Director Sarah Launderville and her daughter, Clara, are doing everything they can to stay safe during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Letter to the Editor

An Invitation

Another world is possible and together we can build it for all of our kids!

The Vermont Coalition for Ethnic and Social

Equity in Schools (VCESES) was formed to support local and statewide efforts to promote school practices that honor the histories and lives of all Vermont’s children and young adults, including students with disabilities. We took the lead in advocacy for Act 1, a new law creating a working group that is now researching school standards that can promote ethnic and social equity in schools in Vermont.

This fall and winter we will be reaching out to communities to share the efforts of the Act 1 Working Group and to talk with students, teachers and families about curriculum and school experiences that will make our schools welcoming and safe for Indigenous, Black and other students of color, LGBTQIA students and disabled students in K-12 classrooms.

Are you concerned about how disability is talked about in schools? Do you want to see an end to

bullying and harassment? Do you have ideas about policies, standards and curriculum that will help advance respect and equity for all students in our schools? Would you like more information about the work we do to support community groups working on school safety and equity issues?

If so, we would love to hear from you! We are on Facebook and we can be reached by writing to us at vtethnicstudies@gmail.com.

Thank you,

Amanda Garces and Alyssa Chen for VCESES

Gratitude from VCDR

Thank you, VCIL, for your leadership in the Vermont Coalition for Disability Rights and for making space for VCDR reports in every issue of this paper! We are one of the earliest cross-disability coalitions in the United States and have been advocating for disability rights since the 1970s. We know that every Vermonter with disabilities and every family has a story to tell and issues that can help shape Vermont’s disability policies and funding practices.

If you would like to receive our free legislative updates, please email us at vcdrvt@gmail.com.

Thank you,

Pam McCarthy

VCDR Vice President and

Vermont Family Network CEO/President

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Tell It Like It Is, at Last

by Deborah Lisi-Baker



Maya Angelou once said, "There is no agony like carrying an untold story." We have been carrying a lot of untold stories; now they are rising up like splinters coming to the surface. That's why so many social justice movements feel so vivid and raw right now and that is why we

need the Black Lives Matter movement: right here, right now.

Years ago, I felt drawn to learn more about the meaning of whiteness, particularly Anglo-American whiteness in the United States. I was traveling for disability rights work and staying at hotels where I (disabled, barely middle-class, white) was being served by new immigrants from Eastern Europe and Asia and by African Americans who had lived in this country for a long time. Since one of my great-grandfathers came to this country with nothing but his dream of America, and he had earned his first American dollars cutting people's hair, I wondered what I was doing in a fancy hotel being served by Americans with different accents and sometimes different skin colors than my own. I wanted to discover why white skin was such a big deal in this country.

Since then, I have learned more about the violence and hatred in American history than I ever found in my school history books. I learned from books and music and deeply from friends. I needed to hear these stories. Chris Dier, a high school teacher in Louisiana, their 2020 Teacher of the Year, told truth when she said, "We are teaching our students to embrace our country, even the things that are negative. We're choosing not to ignore the ghosts of our country's past."

Maya Angelou wasn't just talking about hidden pain when she reminded us of the pain of untold stories. Human beings need to hear each other's pain and we need to make beauty together. We need to give our lives and our histories to others through

words, food, song, dance, in art, in our conversations and even in shared silence. We lose a lot of life when we stomp some of our history down, hide it away, label it as un-American. How can we grow as humans if we won't open up and take a good look at our shared history and do something good with it? If we tell the whole truth of America, maybe we can finally find our way to a deeper American democracy.

Disability calls me to other people's lives: I found disability among the stories of slaves and abolitionists, at the signing of the Declaration of Independence and in Emmett Till's open coffin after he was beaten to death at 14 years old for (supposedly) whistling at a white woman. I found disability history in the story of Thaddeus Stevens, a white disabled man who grew up poor in Vermont. He went on to become one of the foremost politicians in the state of Pennsylvania and an outspoken leader in the new Republican Party and the U.S. Congress. Stevens didn't just want to abolish slavery. He wanted to abolish white privilege. He and others have helped me see that we need to hear and say and act on the truth that Black Lives Matter. In so many ways that truth is still denied.

Many of us are going through hard times during this pandemic. We need to help one another. We need honest and caring conversations. We need all the strength and beauty we can gather to give one another. Recently on Facebook, Sefakor Komabu-Pomeyie shared Chinua Achebe's wisdom: "A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to redeem them from starving. They all have food in their own houses. When we gather in the moonlight village ground, it is not because of the moon. Every man can see it in his own compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so. Therefore let us continue with the team spirit and enjoy the power of togetherness. Let's smile not because we don't have problems but because we are stronger than the problems."

Three New Employees Join VCIL

The Vermont Center for Independent Living has added three new members to its team. Two of them, Sefakor Komabu-Pomeyie and Cara Sachs, will devote a significant amount of time to COVID-19 response and the third, Laura Siegel, will serve as VCIL's Deaf Independence Program coordinator.

Sefakor Komabu-Pomeyie



Sefakor Komabu-Pomeyie of Colchester began in early August as VCIL's independent living coordinator. In addition to COVID response, her main roles will be helping with VCIL's Youth Transition Program, racial justice and intersectionality work.

The teacher and disability rights activist, who grew up in Ghana, has deep connections to VCIL, having served as an intern in 2012 and as a former board member. She recently obtained her PhD in the Educational Leadership and Policies Study Department at the University of Vermont. Komabu-Pomeyie is the founder of Enlightening and Empowering People with Disabilities in Africa, a nonprofit organization that seeks to effect positive change for people with disabilities in Africa. She speaks four languages.

VCIL Executive Director Sarah Launderville said, "We are thrilled to have Sefakor join our staff. She is an internationally recognized advocate who brings great knowledge and enthusiasm to our movement. I admire how committed she is to helping foster passion for self-empowerment and leadership opportunities for people with disabilities and other disadvantaged communities."

Komabu-Pomeyie said, "My values align very well with the mission and vision of VCIL and I like VCIL so much for its unique reputation. As a person with physical disability, it is always my greatest pride to work with my fellow people with disabilities and

that is exactly why I am here. All that I know is, this is the doing of the Lord and I thank God for touching everyone's heart to make this dream a reality."

She added, "I promise to work passionately and diligently to push the name of VCIL to another level. With my expertise joined with that of the other staff, we will make the changes that we want to make for posterity."

Sefakor can be reached at sefakor@vcil.org.

Cara Sachs

Cara Sachs of Winooski joined VCIL on Aug. 10 as a disability justice advocate. Her main focus will be systems advocacy in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.



Sachs is a certified life coach specializing in thriving with chronic illness. She holds a bachelor's degree in psychology, two certifications from the Institute for Professional Excellence in Coaching and is also a former ASL/English interpreter. Sachs' passion stems from lifelong severe chronic pain and other issues from Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, Mast Cell Activation Syndrome and Tracheobronchomalacia. She shares that passion through blogging, workshops and public speaking.

Sachs said, "I'm thrilled to be joining VCIL at this particular moment in time. The world is experiencing major perspective shifts in multiple ways. Many people with chronic health issues have never felt connected to the term 'disability' — until now."

She added, "We're at a pivotal moment. As devastating as the pandemic is, it's also revealing extraordinary new opportunities to improve the lives of disabled and chronically ill folks. I believe we can come out of this period of crisis with greater connection, power and resilience, and I'm excited to help our community on that journey."

Launderville said, "Cara brings a lot to the table, including superb communication skills and a wealth of experience on living well with a disability. I am so happy to have her on staff!"

Cara can be reached at cara@vcil.org.



Laura Siegel

Laura Siegel began working at VCIL in late June. She replaces Missy Boothroyd, who retired as VCIL's Deaf Independence Program coordinator after 15 years of service. The job involves working with Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals

and groups statewide in Vermont and advocating for changes in state laws and policies to improve equal access for Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals.

Siegel moved to Vermont from Florida in 2001 to attend the University of Vermont, where she earned a degree in English/Theater. She got a second degree in ultrasound technology at George Washington University. Siegel spent a few years in that field before returning to Vermont and working with the Deaf community. Last fall, she obtained an MBA in health care management from Southern New Hampshire University.

"I am honored to be a part of VCIL's Deaf Independence Program," Siegel said. "I really look forward to working with all of my Deaf and Hard of Hearing peers. I will do my very best to educate, empower and reach out to the community in our state."

Launderville said, "Laura is doing a great job settling into her new position here at VCIL. I know she will do fantastic work as she strives to make Vermont a better and more equitable place for Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals."

Laura can be reached at laura@vcil.org.



Ericka Reil Receives National Award

Ericka Reil is the recipient of the National Council on Independent Living Region 1 Advocacy Award for her dedication to promoting the rights of people with disabilities and advancing the independent living movement in New England (which comprises NCIL's Region I). The award was presented virtually on July 22 during NCIL's Annual Conference.



Sarah Launderville, executive director of VCIL and president of NCIL, said, "Ericka is a proud woman living with disabilities. She fights for the rights of individuals with disabilities from both personal experience with disabilities and as a mother of a child, Will, who had Autism. Will has since died and she continues to honor him by fighting for people with disabilities."

Reil has worked at VCIL for 17 years, most recently as advocacy coordinator. Reil's accomplishments include being elected to the Barre City Council in March. Her advocacy efforts include representing disability rights at the Vermont Victim Assistance Academy, training advocates for domestic and sexual violence; chairing the Disability Rights Vermont PAIMI Council; taking the lead on representing disability on the Vermont Human Trafficking Task Force; and helping start Barre's first ADA Committee. She advocates for and prioritizes those who are homeless. She's been arrested multiple times with ADAPT and enjoys activism, politics and reading.

In presenting the award, Tim Fuchs, NCIL's operations director, said, "Ericka Reil lives and breathes independent living. Ericka is a force and has a heart of gold. She's known for her giving nature."

Ericka said, "I am very honored to receive this award. However, awards are never something I think about. My work is my passion and my life. I am just glad I'm able to use my voice where it's needed."

RISE Fund: Resilience and Independence in State of Emergency

by Peter Johnke

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed all our lives. People with disabilities and other marginalized groups have been disproportionately affected, greatly impacting their independence. The RISE fund was specifically created to help people with disabilities remain as independent as possible during this pandemic. Since everyone's situation is unique, and there are so many unknowns, this program is designed to be as broad and flexible as possible. The fund can only be used for needs that are directly related to the pandemic, and the cost must be reasonable. If you lost your job and now have bills or other needs you can't pay for, RISE may be able to help. The fund may be used for:

- Computers for telehealth and remote learning.
- Cleaning supplies for staying healthy.
- Utility payments.
- Other equipment and services to mitigate isolation.

VCIL will make referrals to other resources and partner with other organizations when appropriate. You may apply by calling VCIL at 1-800-639-1522 or emailing info@vcil.org. Staff are working from home, so leave a message and someone will call you back. There are no income requirements and no co-pays. The maximum amount is \$2,500. You may apply more than once, as long as the combined amount doesn't exceed \$2,500. The RISE fund was created with money from CARES Act grants and will end on Sept. 30, 2021 or sooner if all the money is spent.

Once your application is approved, you will be working with a peer advocate counselor to assess your needs and work with you to get what you need. The PAC will continue to work with you for at least six months to make sure any equipment is meeting your needs, as well as improving your independence.

It's taking about two to four weeks to process and approve applications. If you have questions or need assistance, please contact us: 1-800-639-1522 or info@vcil.org.



RISE Fund Improves a Life in Unexpected Ways

Bob is a middle-aged guy living in southern Vermont. He has multiple disabilities including a neurological disorder, learning disability and anxiety. With the help of a VCIL peer advocate counselor, he applied to the RISE fund for a laptop. He needed the computer for telehealth visits and to connect with family and friends. Although Bob had used a computer a long time ago, he was very anxious about setting it up. Because of his disability, it takes him time to process information and he was worried that if he had to talk to a tech person over the phone, they would not be patient with him, and he would get frustrated and give up.

When the laptop was delivered, Bob contacted VCIL staff and said, "I haven't used a computer in ages. I don't even know how to use it. Without someone helping me with the basics... It's causing me a little anxiety... I feel I should just send it back to you, [for] someone else who needs it more. Let me know your thoughts on this. Apologies for my Disability."

VCIL staff responded, "You NEVER need to apologize for your disability. Sit tight – Relax. [Your PAC] will be back on Monday and we can get someone to help you with set up and the basics. No one is more deserving than another."

His PAC tells the rest of the story. "Bob said he

Continued on next page

Addressing Police Violence and Safe Schools

by Deborah Lisi-Baker

National and state news cover a troubling fact: Black Americans and Americans with disabilities are more likely to die from police violence and both are overrepresented in prisons. In 2020 Vermont organizations called for action to address police violence and the deeper problem of systemic racism in this country. VCIL Executive Director Sarah Launderville spoke for everyone at VCIL when she said, "Racism, police brutality, communal grief and trauma have been magnified in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, but these issues are not new and cannot be tolerated."

In July, Vermont passed a law to address racial bias and excessive use of force by law enforcement. It prohibits police from using chokeholds, sets funding standards and requires state troopers to wear body cameras. Additional legislative and policy work on police reform is expected. Dummerston Rep. Nader Hashim, a former state trooper, said, "That is a task we cannot complete in one week ... [It] is also not a task we can complete without hearing input from the actual Vermonters — not government entities or advocacy groups — but the actual Vermonters who are afraid of being pulled over for driving while Black, or the Vermonters with mental health issues."

Looking at Schools

Vermont Legal Aid's 2015 report on unfair and unequal student discipline in Vermont public schools found that students with disabilities and students of color were two to three times more likely to be excluded from school through suspension and expulsion. The report noted that "an overreliance on suspensions, expulsions, and arrest" has been counterproductive to student learning and expensive for the state.

Several social justice organizations have joined together to host online forums about the presence of police in schools. Over 100 people attended the first in a series of online forums to discuss the use of police as school resource officers. This year Vermont communities will spend almost \$2 million to

maintain an armed police presence in slightly over 50 percent of the state's schools. Many speakers and participants felt that funds now spent on police in schools could be better spent on other resources, such as restorative practices, peer support and mental health and social supports. To join the conversation, or for information about future events, e-mail vtethnicstudies@gmail.com.

Reimagining Police Culture in America

A report by the Ruderman Family Foundation found that between a third and half of the people who die at the hands of police have some kind of disability and recent national statistics show that the rate of police shootings of Black Americans is much higher than for any other ethnic group. Often violence happens when other interventions would protect lives. Cerelyn J. Davis, a police chief and president of the National Law Enforcement Executives, told The Washington Post, "We need a 'national minimum use of force policy,' a prohibition on the use of chokeholds and mandatory de-escalation training. In testimony to Congress, Davis said we need to 'urgently begin reimagining police culture.'" VCIL welcomes this long overdue conversation about the roots of police violence and our broader social responses to race and disability.

Continued from page 6-----

had 'mastered' his computer. He was very proud and excited that he overcame his anxiety and his learning disability and spent hours figuring how to work a lot of stuff on his computer. He still has a couple of questions and things to figure out, but, big picture, he is so pleased. He has been using it to research stuff online, to email with his mom and sister. He said he finally feels like he has everything he needs and is a 'real person again.' It's the perkier I've heard him in a long while. He was so psyched! He also said when VCIL staff [talked] about 'never apologizing for your disability' it made him teary-eyed and filled him with pride and a sense of connection."

Health Care Rights During the Pandemic

People with disabilities, seniors, New Americans and people of color have all experienced barriers and discrimination during this pandemic. The federal Office of Civil Rights has written several notices to clarify protected groups' legal rights to health care and communication services, including translators, information in their native language, ASL interpreters and plain language summaries of rights and services as required by federal laws. People have legal protections against discrimination on the basis of age, disability, race or national origin. The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services announced that immigrants can use health care to get treatment or preventative services for the COVID-19 coronavirus without having it held against them for public charge purposes.

Early in the outbreak of COVID-19, hospitals and states began denying people with disabilities essential medical equipment and services. The federal Office of Civil Rights has stated that it is illegal to be denied lifesaving treatment because of medical rationing due to disability. During a public health emergency, individuals with disabilities are entitled to reasonable accommodations such as communication services and having a support person with them during medical care.

Vermont Legal Services

Vermont Legal Aid and Disability Rights Vermont provide information and legal services to Vermonters with questions about their legal rights. More information on DRVT services can be found on pages 12 and 13 of this issue of The Independent and Vermont Legal Aid's services are listed on their website at <https://vtlawhelp.org/>. If you have questions or concerns about health care rights, the rights of people in nursing home, eviction protections, money and benefit questions, special education or other disability-related issues, visit <https://vtlawhelp.org/>

or call 1-800-899-2047. Vermont Legal Aid is also hosting virtual town halls on rights. You can join online or by phone, or watch past events by going to <https://vtlawhelp.org/coronavirus-updates>.

Looking for Plain Language Information?

Green Mountain Self-Advocates and Self Advocates Becoming Empowered have created plain language documents to help self-advocates and their support workers better understand how to stay safe. The documents are short and use clear language and illustrations. GMSA also worked with UVM's Center on Disability and Community Inclusion on a plain language summary of how to make workplaces safe during COVID-19. These and other resources can be found at www.gmsavt.org and <https://www.selfadvocacy.net/>.

The federal government has also put out plain language reminders and tips in response to COVID-19. As a recent notice states, it is now the law that federal programs must make information available in plain language. A new fact sheet for first responders provides suggestions to help people know how to write simply and communicate clearly. The document is called "Ensuring Language Access and Effective Communication During Response and Recovery: A Checklist for Emergency Responders." It can be downloaded from the Department of Health and Human Services.

Worried About Violence at Home?

Calls and reports of domestic violence have increased during this pandemic. For immediate help, call 911. The Vermont Network Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault wants people to know that assistance is available if you need someone to talk to, a safe place to go, or help when violence is happening. Their website has up-to-date information on programs near you and information on other resources and support: <https://vtnetwork.org/get-help/>. You can get support by calling these

statewide hotlines for immediate support:

Domestic Violence Hotline

800-228-7395

Sexual Violence Hotline

800-489-7273

Deaf Vermonters Advocacy Services helps Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing Vermonters who are dealing with domestic violence or sexual assault. They can be reached through their website, www.dvas.org.

Other Vermont Contacts for Help

We are all waiting to see if the emergency COVID-19 resources and services over the summer will receive additional funding to continue during this fall and winter. Check with VCIL, area agencies on aging, community action agencies or any of the following organizations for updated information on important resources:

- For information on feeding your family, visit <https://www.vtfoodbank.org/>.
- Apply for 3SquaresVT (and other benefits) at <https://dcf.vermont.gov/mybenefits/apply>.
- A full list of food resources can be found at Hunger Free Vermont: www.hungerfreevt.org.
- Unemployment: <https://labor.vermont.gov/unemployment-insurance>.
- Legal Services Vermont and Vermont Legal Aid updates: <https://vtlawhelp.org/coronavirus-updates>.
- Health Insurance: <https://www.greenmountain-care.org/apply-online-health-insurance>.
- VT Helplink Alcohol & Drug Support Center: <https://vthelplink.org/>.
- Public Wi-Fi hot spots: <https://publicservice.vermont.gov/content/wifi-hot-spots-active-during-covid-19-pdf>.

- Other connectivity resources for getting online: <https://publicservice.vermont.gov/content/new-connectivity-resources-support-you-during-covid-19-state-emergency-vermont>.

- In need of other assistance: Call 211.

New Information for Kids and Parents

Vermont Family Network's Puppets in Education uses the magic of puppetry to help children talk about important issues. In 2020 they created a video of a new puppet show to help pre-K through fourth-grade kids talk about anxiety/worries during COVID 19. In January, a videoed show on bullying for grades K-8 students and a new show on anxiety/worry for K-8 students will be posted. For more information on these programs and on other shows, visit www.vermontfamilynetwork.org/puppets-in-education/topics-and-workshops/.

VFN and other partners, such as the Vermont Coalition for Disability Rights and the Disability Law Project at Legal Aid, have posted videos of town hall discussions on many subjects, including school options for students with disabilities and their families, special education rights, mental health support, connecting with teens and other topics important to young adults and families during COVID-19. For more information, go to www.vermontfamilynetwork.org.

Looking for National Deaf Coverage?

The Daily Moth, a national Deaf news service, delivers news online using American Sign Language. They have provided updates on COVID-19 topics and have been a good source for information on Deaf advocacy for ASL interpreters at local and national news broadcasts. Look for them at www.dailymoth.com.

Editor's Note: Please see page 6 for information about VCIL's new services during COVID-19.



VCDR was about to hold Disability Awareness Day at the Statehouse when COVID-19 arrived in the Green

Mountain State. VCDR member organizations moved our legislative advocacy online, monitoring legislative committees and key votes via Zoom and holding regular planning meetings and workshops to help Vermonters with disabilities and their families stay informed and involved in discussions on policies, funding and services. Both the administration and the Legislature suddenly faced a new and complicated task: keeping Vermont safe during an unprecedented public health emergency.

Addressing the First COVID-19 Crisis

In March, the Vermont Legislature recessed for a few weeks due to concerns about COVID-19. In order to meet, they needed to authorize new ways for committees to meet and for the House and the Senate to vote on legislation remotely. The Legislature had to pass a budget by June 30 for the state's fiscal year 2021, which begins on July 1, 2020 and goes through June 30, 2021. The Legislature also had to pass other essential bills, and determine how best to use \$1.25 billion in federal aid to the state to combat the grave impacts of the COVID health and economic crisis.

Both the House and the Senate moved quickly to set up a process to meet and decide the best ways to use federal coronavirus relief funds, pass a budget and other necessary policy legislation. A number of separate bills were passed to spend the federal CARES Act funds, which have to be used by Dec. 30, 2020.

In June the Legislature passed a budget for July through September in order to keep Vermont funded and active during the first quarter of this fis-

cal year. The state used most of the federal CARES Act funding but reserved about \$200 million for the remaining budget discussions in August, hoping to know more about any additional federal aid or guidance before passing the budget for the full year. The Legislature then recessed again to allow for revenue updates and to see if there were any additional federal dollars or more flexible uses of the funds for a longer period of time.

In August the Legislature came back to review the governor's proposed budget for the full year, from July 1 of this year till June 30, 2021. Despite a \$182 million revenue shortfall, the governor's proposed budget does not include cuts to "essential services and programs," though these may be level-funded. Instead, the governor proposed 3 percent and 5 percent reductions in departmental operations and internal services rather than direct services. The revenue gap has been filled with surplus dollars, savings, Medicaid and the COVID relief dollars when allowed.

As *The Independent* goes to press, both the House and Senate have passed their versions of the budget. H.969, an act relating to making appropriations for the support of government, is expected to pass before Sept. 25 to give the governor time to review it and sign it into law before the end of September. They have authorized the Joint Fiscal Committee to make adjustments as necessary if there is a change in federal aid and/or emergencies in the interim. The appropriation committees also set service priorities, which include services to vulnerable populations, health care, education, economic stimulus for individuals and businesses and broadband access for underserved areas of the state.

There are also proposals to get more funding into the hands of the most economically challenged families, using existing relief funds and any new funds that may become available. The Legislature is also expected to pass H.968, the Vermont Coronavirus Economic Stimulus Equity Program, to provide stimulus payments for migrant workers and others

unable to receive the original federal stimulus payments.

Looking Ahead

No one knows whether additional COVID-19 emergency funds will be available after December. For this reason, and because of the negative impact of the pandemic on Vermont's revenue, the budget outlook for FY 2022 will be very challenging.

The pandemic has highlighted ongoing inequities facing low-income Vermonters, seniors and Vermonters with disabilities and their families. The administration and the Legislature have been focused on serving the most vulnerable Vermonters with careful use of the COVID relief funds. Vermont's response to this pandemic has shown that unmet needs can be addressed. It has also highlighted ongoing needs that must be addressed, like housing the homeless, equity in remote learning and comprehensive mental health crisis response services.

Vulnerable residents and staff of nursing homes, health care providers and other hospital staff, people in prisons, educators and childcare workers struggling to teach and care for our children and stay safe themselves, as well as businesses trying to survive in the world of COVID-19, tell us we have much more to do to stay safe and help others be safe. Vermonters deserve a lot of credit for the innovation and care so many have shown to take care of themselves and help others. We need to use what we learned this year to better prepare for the future.

VCDR Testimony and Town Halls

VCDR members testified on many budget and policy issues affecting Vermonters with disabilities and their families throughout the year. A complete summary of legislative and policy decisions relating to disability programs and services will be available later this fall after the Legislature adjourns. Readers can find these reports on our website or signing up to receive our VCDR Alerts. (See below.)

Over the summer, we surveyed Vermonters with

disabilities and families on their concerns about services and supports during COVID-19 and used these survey results to plan the first of two town halls on disability issues during COVID-19: one in July on food, housing and financial issues and accessing needed services and the other in September, which focused on special education rights and services during COVID-19. These were videoed and are available for online viewing. Here are the links:

Disabilities and COVID:

<https://youtu.be/wfAXjaSfNjo>

Back to School with Disabilities/Special Health Needs:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o7j_OrkaCeQ&feature=youtu.be

This report is based on information from VCDR Coordinator Karen Lafayette. Karen served as a state representative in the Vermont Legislature from 1993 to 2000. In addition to serving as VCDR's legislative advocate, Karen is also the advocate for the Vermont Low Income Advocacy Council and the Vermont Community Action Partnership.

**VCDR thanks the
Vermont Developmental
Disabilities Council,
VCDR members and friends
for their support.**

We welcome participation in VCDR advocacy and educational efforts and invite you to sign up for free legislative and policy emails and to share your stories and concerns with us. Reach us by email at vcdrvt@gmail.com, on Facebook or on our website: www.vcdr.org.

DISABILITY RIGHTS VERMONT ANNOUNCES FY21 PRIORITIES



Disability Rights Vermont (DRVT) is a private nonprofit agency dedicated to defending and advancing the rights of people with mental health and disability issues. We are empowered and funded by the federal government to investigate abuse, neglect and serious rights violations. Our 15-member staff team combined with the seven-member staff of the Disability Law Project of Vermont Legal Aid (DLP) creates the cross-disability legal protection and advocacy system for Vermont. This past year we have tried to help people with the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic presents. Ordinary difficulties, isolation and hardship have become even greater for people with disabilities.

DRVT is once again looking for comments on our priorities to be approved by our Board for the upcoming fiscal year (Oct. 1, 2020 – Sept. 30, 2021.) **We would welcome your thoughts about how our unique system can best serve people with disabilities and mental health issues.** DRVT is publishing our current priorities for the Protection & Advocacy for Individuals with Mental Illness (PAIMI) program, for the Protection & Advocacy for Developmental Disabilities (PADD) and the Protection & Advocacy for Individual Rights (PAIR) programs on the adjoining pages. These priorities serve to focus the work of the agency and are developed by our Board and our advisory councils, who get input from the community and staff. Your input is appreciated! We strive to do as much as we can with the resources we have...and we can do that best when folks in the community let us know their greatest advocacy needs!

To help us stay connected to the community we serve, send us your comments at:
wenyu@disabilityrightsvt.org or to DRVT, 141 Main St., Suite 7, Montpelier, VT 05602

Or by phone: 1-800-834-7890 or, locally, at (802) 229-1355

And please visit our website at www.disabilityrightsvt.org – there you will find more particular objectives within the general priorities below.

Case acceptance by Disability Rights Vermont is based on four factors:

- (1) the client meets the applicable grant's definition of an individual with a disability;
- (2) the case is within the priorities of the grant;
- (3) the case has merit (sufficient evidence to support the claim); and
- (4) there are sufficient staff resources to take on the case.

CURRENT PRIORITIES FOR PROTECTION & ADVOCACY FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH A MENTAL ILLNESS

Priority 1: Investigate individual cases of abuse, neglect and serious rights violations in inpatient facilities (hospitals, any state-run facilities, emergency departments, facilities for minors), prisons/jails, and community settings, including peer services and designated agencies.

Priority 2: Reduce the use of seclusion, restraint, coercion, involuntary procedures, and inpatient confinement when not warranted by patient treatment needs through systemic efforts. Continue systemic work to create culturally competent, trauma-informed, violence free and coercion free mental health treatment environments.

Priority 3: Reach out to community settings, des-

ignated facilities and hospitals, emergency rooms, prisons/jails, residential and therapeutic care homes. Monitor conditions and educate residents, patients and providers about rights, self-advocacy, and DRVT services, with emphasis on the integration mandate of the ADA.

Priority 4: Advocate for self-determination, access to alternative treatment options and community integration. DRVT will advocate for designated agencies to establish relationships with individuals in inpatient settings during discharge planning in order to support people to seek their full potential in the community.

PROTECTION & ADVOCACY FOR PEOPLE WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES (PADD)
AND PROTECTION & ADVOCACY FOR INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS (PAIR)

(DRVT and DLP work together to serve across ALL disabilities! PADD and PAIR come from different sources.)

We strive to do as much as we can with the resources we have...and we can do that best when folks in the community let us know their greatest advocacy needs! For a full listing of our current priorities under each goal please visit www.disabilityrightsvt.org/programs.html or contact us at 1-800-834-7890 and request a copy be sent to you.

CURRENT GOALS & PRIORITIES

- People with disabilities have access to needed health care/long-term care; children with developmental disabilities and/or mental health needs will receive needed services and supports. Represent individuals seeking access to needed health care/long-term care when issue is disability, duration of services, covered services, due process or EPSDT. Priority given to cases involving: access to COVID-19 related health care including access to ventilators, personal protective equipment and vaccination when available; children and youths inappropriately placed or held in emergency departments due to lack of mental health services; and services and discharge planning for children and youth transitioning from residential placements (PADD/PAIR).
- Students with disabilities are identified, evaluated, and receive a free and appropriate public education and related services during the COVID-19 pandemic. They are educated in the most integrated appropriate educational setting, are not harassed, are not unlawfully disciplined, and are not unlawfully suspended or expelled from their educational program; they receive an appropriate transition from school to employment and independent living, and use of truancy proceedings is eliminated. Federal and Vermont entitlements and procedural protections are preserved. Federal COVID-related funds are used to increase equity in Vermont's education system (PADD).
- Ensure access to appropriate services/supports in the least restrictive and most integrated settings. Advocate for people with disabilities in nursing homes, long-term care homes, correctional facilities, inpatient hospital settings and other restrictive settings for whom appropriate services/supports may be available in more integrated settings (PADD/PAIR).
- Advocate to improve access to developmental services for children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (PADD).
- Provide advocacy to ensure people with intellectual and developmental disabilities do not have unnecessary or unnecessarily restrictive guardianships (PADD).
- Access to public benefits (SSI, Unemployment Insurance and COVID-related state and federal payment programs). Access to and preservation of SSI benefits for income eligible children under age 18 or turning 18 whose benefits are terminated on the basis of disability. Maintain maximum SS benefits for adults who are disabled and working. Ensure access to Unemployment Insurance and COVID-related state and federal payment programs (PADD/PAIR).
- Provide advocacy to ensure individuals with disabilities will have increased access to businesses open to the public as written in Title III of the ADA (PAIR).
- Provide advocacy for improved access to government services and programs as provided in Title II of the ADA (PADD/PAIR).
- Ensure that individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities are not discriminated against in hiring, employment and advancement.
- Ensure that individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities are not discriminated against in businesses open to the public under Title III of the ADA, including not discriminated against in housing.
- Ensure that adults and children with intellectual and developmental disabilities living independently, in institutions, in juvenile treatment facilities or in parental, family, group or developmental homes, are free from abuse, neglect or rights violations (PADD).
- Increase knowledge and awareness of the civil and legal rights of people with disabilities (PADD/PAIR).

Your Voting Rights as a Person with a Disability

Who Can Vote?

You can vote in Vermont elections if you:

- Are a U.S. citizen.
 - Are a Vermont resident.
 - Will be 18 years or older by the day of the election.
 - Register to vote.
 - Take the "Voter's Oath." (You will do this when you register to vote for the first time in Vermont.)
- If you are a U.S citizen, 18 years old or older and are registered to vote, you can vote in U.S. elections even if you have a disability. Not only can you vote, it is important to vote so that you have a say in important programs that help people with disabilities! In Vermont, you have the right to vote:
- Even if you have a guardian.
 - Even if you need help reading or filling out a ballot.
 - Even if you are homeless.
 - Even if you have been convicted of a crime or are incarcerated.
 - In person on Election Day.

Or vote by mail! If you have already registered you should receive a ballot in the mail. Send it in a week early or bring it to the polls in person!

Important Election Dates

Nov. 2, 2020

- Last day to request an absentee ballot for the general election.
- Last day to vote early at your town/city clerk's office.
- Last day to return your absentee ballot to your town/city clerk's office.

Nov. 3, 2020 ~ Election Day

- General election and absentee ballots are due by close of polls at 7 p.m.

Your Vote is Your Voice

Voting is very important. It is a way for you to help choose the people who will run our government. Our government makes laws, decides how money gets spent and much more.

Who gets picked to run the government makes a big difference for people with disabilities and their families.

If You Need an Accommodation

You have the right to request reasonable accommodations to vote. If you need accommodations to vote, you may:

- Contact your town/city clerk to request accommodations.
- Bring a person of your choice into the voting booth with you for assistance (not your employer or union representative).
- Ask an election official for assistance with marking your ballot.
- Ask an election official to bring a ballot to your car at your polling place. (This is called "curbside voting.")
- Request a sample ballot (to see what you will be voting on before the election).
- Bring a magnifying glass or other devices to help you see the ballot.
- Bring a list of candidates into the voting booth with you (but you must take it with you when you are done voting).
- Ask for another ballot (maximum of three) if you make a mistake.
- Use the accessible voting system at your polling place.
- Use the accessible vote-at-home option.



FOR MORE INFORMATION, READ OUR 2020 VOTER'S GUIDE FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

WWW.DISABILITYRIGHTSVT.ORG OR CALL US AT 1-800-834-7890 FOR A COPY!

VT SILC Olmstead Webinar #2

Tuesday, Oct. 6, 2020
10 a.m. - 12 noon via Zoom Meeting

**Be part of the conversation about housing for people
with disabilities in Vermont!**

The Vermont Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC) and its partners are working to address the issues around accessible housing in Vermont, and to reinvigorate the state's Olmstead Plan. We will be hearing from Vermont Psychiatric Survivors and the Vermont Center for Independent Living about the state of accessible housing and supported living in Vermont. We will then be having discussions on what we want to see change and what we would like a new Olmstead plan to look like.

Our Goals:

1. Hear from organizations and individuals in our community about issues with accessible and supported housing in Vermont.
2. Identify key issues to be addressed to eliminate barriers to independent living in Vermont.
3. Put those issues into an updated Vermont Olmstead Plan.

How to Join:

If you are interested in being a part of the discussion, or would like to learn more, you can reach out to Tom at the email below for an invitation or for additional information. We hope to see you there!

Contact:

Tom Hamilton, SILC ED: vtzilcdir@gmail.com
www.vermontsilc.org





When I was in school, perfection was non-negotiable. Only straight A's were allowed, and an eraser was never acceptable. I spent high school and college in honors classes and had little time for anyone who didn't share my definition of success. My perfection isolated me.

When my son was just 2 years old, his speech therapist suggested we have him tested for autism. That was the first time anyone used "autism" to describe Myles. When he was diagnosed, I was clueless. I was surprised that our local preschool had Myles in the same classroom as all his peers. I cried the first time we got a progress report for Myles, and it said his skills were "developing," rather than mastered. I blamed myself for Myles' autism.

Then, I found my community. In 2018, I attended the Vermont Leadership Series alongside a number of self-advocates, as well as other parents of children with developmental disabilities like autism. As I networked with these advocates and allies, I made lasting friendships. I learned how to look at the world differently, and because of that, I was finally able to connect with Myles.

Now, I celebrate all kinds of success. I'm the mom who emails teachers to tell them, "Myles introduced himself on the playground" or "Myles let someone else sit in the blue chair." I've learned that "special needs," aren't all that special. They're really just human needs. **The Vermont Leadership Series also taught me that there is still so much work to be done.** I now serve on the Vermont Developmental Disabilities Council to help educate legislators and influence positive change for those with disabilities. I want the world to learn the things that I have learned, to see success differently, and to celebrate everyone's contributions.



Anastasia learns about positive change at the Vermont Leadership Series.



The Vermont Leadership Series is for people with diverse experiences of disability.

The Vermont Leadership Series trains people with disabilities and their family members to become advocates for positive social change.

Workshops help participants speak to legislators, craft positive and effective messages, and develop their personal commitment to making our little state a better place for people with disabilities.

Visit the website to learn more:
<https://ddc.vermont.gov/plan-and-projects/leadership-series>

Cutting Through Isolation and Connecting



Connecting with others these days is a logistical nightmare. But social isolation is a real life, waking nightmare that affects far too many Vermonters. Even before the onset of COVID-19, thousands of older Vermonters were living in

isolation, with little access to the people, supports, services and interaction that make life valuable to most of us. In the time of COVID, however, most of us now understand what that feels like. We can empathize. During the pandemic, many of us have struggled with feelings of helplessness and uselessness. As we slowly begin to reopen the world, taking delight in the small joys found in live music outside, the bike path, or a drive-in movie, be sure to remember that your isolation may be changing, but for many older Vermonters this is a way of life. How can we, as adults of all ages, combat the ageism that results in limited access, mental anguish and exclusion of older people on a systemic level?

What we must remember is that older people are not separate from the rest of society. We are all somewhere on a spectrum of aging. In June, COVE began a program called Connecting. For 10 weeks older adults across Vermont have been paired with high school students for weekly conversation. Contrary to popular perception, younger and older people really do want to reach out and connect with each other, but they're just not sure how. It helps people feel less closed off from the world when they connect with someone with a different lens, a different experience.

One message that has come through loud and clear is that all Connecting participants recognize that many of the issues we are dealing with today are the same ones that society has dealt with for decades. History repeats itself. In an age of rampant misinformation, how do we find the truth in the world? Through human connection and stories.

Those stories are our legacy. Younger people are looking to hear from older people about what civil rights, equity, women's rights, pandemics and economic recessions were like before.

Growing up without the same technology we use today, some older adults find it can be very intimidating. The shame of not knowing how to do something, even if there is no reason that you should know how to do it, leads us to disengage, rather than seek assistance. If you don't know how, you are not alone! COVE has spent dozens of staff hours this spring and summer working one-on-one with individuals to help them install and use different digital platforms and systems. We have worked with people to learn to use the controls, discuss "Zoom etiquette" and explore new platforms in a safe and private environment.

If you are interested in joining Connecting or would like help with a digital platform, email Marichel@vermontelders.org or call: (802) 595-9872.

Toolbox to Address Social Isolation

In trying to address social isolation, COVE has put together a "toolbox." Our tips include:

- ~ Reach out and include older members of the community for planning, input, and engagement, especially when thinking about equity and diversity.
- ~ Don't make assumptions about ability, either with technology or access. Many older adults are much more capable than we assume. Younger people often understand that feeling of shame and inability to do something the world thinks they "should be able to do," which makes them great tech tutors. Schools and senior centers often work together to make that connection

- ~ The world is changing quickly. Share your experiences. Listen to others'. What do you know about? How can you share that? What can you learn?

- ~ Be brave and learn how to connect virtually. Ask for help; you're not alone.

- ~ Have a skill? Create, share, teach, donate.

Breaking Down Barriers to Employment

by Sarah Launderville

When we met up with Dean Marchand, a restaurant cook in Bennington about what work means to him, he told us, “Even though I’m not working now, it’s like what I did, going back to work, it made me feel human again, like I was contributing. I can’t even describe how much it did for my self-worth. And there’s a depression side of that. I was bad for a while. So [working] helped me be better for the people around me as well. I can’t put a premium on that.”

People with disabilities have fought for equitable access to the workplace for more than half a century. And more needs to be done. “Working with Disability: Toward a Truly Inclusive Vermont Labor Force” is a new report highlighting the importance of access to work for people with disabilities. It is set to be released in October.

This was a collaborative project with partners from the Vermont Center for Independent Living, Vermont Developmental Disabilities Council, Vermont Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired, VocRehab Vermont, Vermont Statewide Independent Council, Governor’s Committee on the Employment of People with Disabilities and the Vermont Public Assets Institute.

The U.S. Department of Labor announced that the theme for National Disability Employment Awareness Month this October is “Increasing Access and Opportunity.” This theme highlights key points that are emphasized in the report and is exactly what needs to be focused on here in Vermont.

People with disabilities still face discrimination in the workplace. It might be when asking for an accommodation at an interview and being denied. It might be that the business does not have a wheelchair-accessible location for a person with a disability to work. Other barriers are the way people with disabilities are treated and employers not hiring someone with a disability because of their own biases.

There are also programmatic barriers to returning to work and those programs, while trying to help people with disabilities, often create additional

blocks when returning to employment.

We know the benefits of work are immense. There is obviously the money and the paycheck that allows for individual financial independence, but we know the value of work is so much more. It allows for connection, sense of self, confidence and pride. Returning to work for many after living on benefits increases mental health well-being as well.

People with disabilities are an important part of the Vermont labor force, but in 2018 only half of working age Vermonters with disabilities worked. A more inclusive workforce benefits all Vermonters. This includes universal design and changing workplace culture: designing work spaces that everyone can access, outreach when hiring people with disabilities and having infrastructure that is accessible like transportation, broadband and internet to extend physical and technological accessibility.

It means addressing the inequitable systems that were designed for people without disabilities and need to be updated. In this time of COVID we have a great opportunity to address these systems, including having more work from home and educational opportunities available.

Fully integrating people with disabilities will take change, including policy shifts and willingness, but it can absolutely be done. People with disabilities want to work but we need policymakers, employers and fellow Vermonters to ensure that the barriers are removed. This includes workplaces in the public and private sectors that are accessible, ensuring the basic needs of people with disabilities are met (including the “benefit cliffs” that keep people from working to their greatest potential) and making training and higher education accessible and available.

As we approach National Disability Employment Awareness Month, we invite you to share your experience accessing employment. Visit the VCIL Facebook page and join in a conversation to heighten the awareness of the message the ‘Working with Disability’ report conveys.



got access?

by Ash Brittenham

Voting is important to me. If I don't vote, the things that are wrong with my community may stay the same. I know we need policies protecting people with disabilities from discrimination and services to allow us to live independently.

It's important to me to feel heard and to be seen as part of the community. Also because Why Not?

Voting is important to many people I know in Vermont.

Bob, a student at Montpelier High School who is doing virtual school during the pandemic, is voting in the presidential election by mail. "I like mail. It comes every day," explains Bob. Bob works in his family's book-selling business, labeling and shipping books to customers. He is using the online form on the Secretary of State's website to request his ballot, then completing the paper form once it arrives, putting it in its preprinted envelope, adding a stamp and returning his ballot by mail.

Saudia in Morrisville plans to vote in person as long as polls are open. She voted in the primary and said the process was smooth and COVID precautions were taken to clean surfaces, socially distance and promote mask-wearing. She votes because her "ancestors went through too much to not vote. It feels empty, might not change anything, but I do my part."

Adam in Jericho plans to drop his ballot in the town hall ballot drop box to limit his exposure to COVID-19. Politically active, Adam feels strongly about exercising his constitutional right to vote. "It's important to be involved in elections because if we don't get involved we won't see any changes. I still believe that every vote really does matter." Adam serves on his town's energy committee and is applying for a position on the Statewide Independent

Living Council.

Stella, voting for the first time in Randolph, is feeling the weight of the decision-making, "It's nerve racking. Everyone puts so much pressure on voting (rightly so) and it makes it seem very scary." Still she will vote in the Nov. 3 election.

Janell, an employment specialist at Another Way, is planning to hand-deliver her ballot to Barre's ballot drop box. She uses absentee voting as an accommodation to control the lighting while filling out the paper ballot. Some polling places have low or harsh lighting that impact her ability to see clearly. "I used to enjoy the atmosphere of going in person on voting day, but my objective now is to avoid crowds and conversations in a polarized world." Obstacles aside, she will vote. "I definitely feel like on a local level it's very important to vote about issues in my community. I always feel my vote counts in a local setting where some things pass by a few votes. I don't really know if my vote counts on the national level, but I do it anyway because I believe in democracy."

"Voting is important to me to make my opinions known," says Jessie, a peer advocate counselor with VCIL since 2012. Jessie votes at a senior center near her home in Rutland. There is a push button door for wheelchair access and the voting machine has a touch pad with raised arrows to navigate voting choices that are read to voters wearing headphones. "I like my independence," says Jessie. She is also improving access across Vermont by providing ADA technical assistance with VCIL.

I hope voting is important to you too. If so, make a plan for how you will vote that works for you. Talk with people you know about their plan to vote as well. Go for it.

Ash Brittenham is a poet and activist born and raised in Montpelier. He now lives with his Chihuahua named B in their own apartment in the city of Charlotte, N.C. He likes ducks.

B u l l e t i n B o a r d



Persevering in the Pandemic

Vermont Family Network is holding a Learning Series for families of children, youths and young adults with disabilities or special health care needs and the professionals who serve them. Each of these learning sessions are videoed and are available to view after each event. For more information, go to

<https://www.vermontfamilynetwork.org/events-news/online-learning-series/>

‘Wrongly Confined’ Report

DRVT’s 2020 report, “Wrongly Confined,” calls for an end to unjust, discriminatory and harmful treatment of Vermonters who are forced to stay in inpatient hospitals and psychiatric units because of the lack of community options. Download a copy at <http://www.disabilityrightsvt.org/pdfs/Publications/DRVT-Olmstead-Report-2020.pdf>

Speak Up About Special Education

Vermont special education rules are open for comment. This is an opportunity for students and families to share your experiences and any concerns regarding your Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

Vermont Family Network is gathering information regarding proposed changes in a short survey posted on their website.

Your comments will be included in a written report and shared with the State Board of Education. If you are interested in submitting more detailed written comments to the State Board of Education, contact (802) 876-5315 or info@vtfn.org. The VFN survey will be open until Oct. 30.

To find out about other disability or senior programs and activities, contact VCIL at 1-800-639-1522 or the Senior Helpline at 1-800-642-5119



For information on the next issue, email smonte@vcil.org

or call

1-800-639-1522