

# 2024 End of Session Report

## Reps. Karen Dolan and Lori Houghton City of Essex Junction, Chittenden 22



The 2024 legislative session is adjourned! Our work officially began on January 3rd, and we passed significant legislation these past months to benefit Vermonters in all 14 counties. This report provides some of the highlights of our legislative accomplishments. We advanced critical policies in the areas of housing, land use modernization, flood recovery and resiliency, education, health care, judiciary and climate action. We passed a balanced budget that meets the needs of Vermonters in each of our communities. Please reach out with questions and feedback. We look forward to connecting about our shared goal to create a Vermont that works for all of us.

### 2024 LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

The legislature tackled a wide range of issues in 2024. While none of these challenges can be solved in a single session, our priorities included:

- Passing and maintaining a fiscally responsible, only 0.46% greater than the Governor's proposed budget, balanced state budget that reflects our values and priorities and supports Vermonters in all 14 counties.
- Tackling the complex and interconnected challenges of housing and workforce development and supports.
- Enacting forward-looking, inclusive strategies to combat climate change and transition to a sustainable way of life, as we help low and moderate income Vermonters transition away from fossil fuel reliance and implement a state plan to achieve emissions reduction requirements as outlined in the Global Warming Solutions Act.
- Creating affordable housing stock for Vermont's working families and combatting homelessness statewide by modernizing support systems and increasing funding for construction.
- Supporting business stability and growth in all corners of Vermont, and increasing the capacity of our rural communities to access resources and plan for a vibrant future.

This is far from a comprehensive list. With 150 members and 13 standing committees, the House accomplished a lot during our five months in Montpelier. And in all of this work, we look toward the future to enact legislation that protects the most vulnerable, boosts vitality in all 14 counties, and leaves no Vermonter behind.

### EDUCATION

#### [School Construction Aid: Taking the Next Steps](#)

Vermont's school buildings need more than \$6 billion in investments statewide to bring them up to date, replace worn-out systems, achieve code compliance, and replace buildings that would be cheaper to rebuild than repair. Unfortunately, the state has not managed a program to assist school districts in paying for major capital projects since 2007, and some districts have struggled to pass bonds. A new school construction aid program will offer vital support to districts seeking to improve and modernize their facilities. The legislature passed H.871 as a next step towards restarting Vermont's state-level school construction program. This bill creates a legislative working group to prepare draft legislation for January 2025 that designs a new state construction aid program. This task force will build a program that incentivizes projects that address cost drivers in education such as number of schools, energy/heating costs, and replacing school buildings at the end of their lifespan. H.871 also creates a facilities master

plan grant program which will help school districts assess their current needs and plan for future projects.

### [Cost-Sharing for Education Services](#)

Act 46 of 2016 at first encouraged, and then required, school districts to unify as a way to better serve students and manage costs. Building on this progress, the legislature passed H.630 which allows school districts to establish Boards of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES) to collaborate on common needs such as specialized student services, joint supply procurement, professional development, or regional busing contracts. BOCES are common in other states, and are expected to be popular and useful here in Vermont. These entities could conceivably provide highly specialized services that some students must now access in other states. BOCES could also help school districts draw down more federal dollars by jointly hiring the skilled grant writers needed to navigate the federal grant process. The basic concept underlying this bill is strength and economy in numbers.

### [The Future of Public Education](#)

This year school districts across the state saw unprecedented increases in education costs in their FY25 budgets, and this challenging year created urgency around establishing a modern vision for public education in Vermont. As a result, the House Education committee designed the Commission on the Future of Public Education, a significant part of the legislature's work on this year's Yield Bill. This Commission is charged with examining Vermont's public school system: the structure, cost drivers, the size of the system, and the services provided in schools. After robust engagement with the education field as well as the public, the Commission will make recommendations about how Vermont can create a world class education system at a cost our communities can afford. This bill is awaiting the Governor's signature.

## **HEALTH CARE**

With double-digit increases in health care rates every year, high health care costs are squeezing every budget— from your family budget to school budgets and our state budget. To make Vermont affordable, the legislature is working to address health care costs. Across Vermont, mental health needs have increased in recent years and it is crucial that we continue to invest and support access to mental health care. In response, the Legislature's budget provides a 3% increase in rates to the State's designated mental health agencies. We also gave the Green Mountain Care Board resources to tackle and regulate prescription drug prices (S.98) and we strengthened oversight of pharmacy benefit managers (H.233). We provided critical resources to local Emergency Medical Service providers (H.622), and we ensured reimbursement parity to telemedicine, which should help seniors check in without needing to drive (H.861). We invested in addressing our opiate epidemic and the FY25 budget directs \$1.2M to support recovery residences. We will continue to support health care affordability in the next biennium, so that

Vermont is a place all people can live safely and take care of themselves.

### [H.766 - Reducing the Burden On Primary Care Providers](#)

Vermont is experiencing a severe shortage of healthcare providers, and those dedicated professionals spend around 25% of their working time dealing with insurance companies that too often second-guess their medical expertise. H.766 will greatly relieve the red-tape burden on our providers, allowing them to spend more time treating patients. H.766 will eliminate the time-consuming practice known as prior authorization - when your primary care provider decides that you need a test or referral, you'll no longer need to wait for your health insurer to take a second look at their decisions. H.766 also changes step therapy protocol to better address Vermonter's specific prescription drug needs.

### [Medicare Savings Program: Keeping More Money In the Pockets of Older Vermonters](#)

Too many low-income aging Vermonters face a benefits cliff when they reach the age of 65. In transitioning from Medicaid to Medicare, these folks see a sudden jump in costs due to premiums and copays for services and prescription drugs. With the passage of the FY2025 budget nearly 10,000 eligible Vermonters can expect to keep \$2,096 in their pockets per person, or \$4,192 for married couples, per year, beginning on January 1, 2026. This means that these Vermonters will see an increase in their Social Security checks of almost \$175 per month. Increasing eligibility for the Medicare Savings Program (MSP) allows this benefit to reach older Vermonters with incomes up to \$29,367 or \$39,858 for married couples. This will spare some of our most vulnerable neighbors the great economic hardships that often accompany aging and retirement, while providing our hospitals and providers with patients that can now afford to seek treatment. This bill will result in allowing close to 10,000 low-income Vermonters to focus on the care they need when they are sick, rather than on the financial stress of out-of-pocket costs. It will also allow an estimated 3,800 Vermonters access to a valuable prescription drug benefit for the first time at no cost to the state.

## **ACCESS TO JUSTICE**

One of the biggest challenges our court system currently faces is a backlog of cases, which predated the COVID pandemic. During the pandemic, fewer cases were filed but those that were filed were not being processed. After the courts fully reopened, a surge in filings left the courts falling further behind. In 2023, the courts experienced a number of judicial vacancies, which have only recently been filled. Working to address this backlog is critical to supporting public safety. The Judiciary Committee and the Appropriations Committee worked to ensure that the budget included the resources necessary to enable cases to be heard in a timely fashion. An additional \$8M is appropriated in the FY25 budget for the needed positions and required work. The Judiciary, State Attorneys, Defender General, Attorney General (Court Diversion), DOC (Community Justice Centers), and the Center

for Crime Victims Services are receiving additional resources. These investments will help ensure individuals can be held accountable for their actions as soon as possible after offending – a key to ensuring public safety.

### Supporting Public Safety

House Judiciary worked on a number of public safety-related bills this session. The legislature approved H.563, which is a bill designed to close gaps in existing statute, including that current law does not prohibit a person from entering another person's car without consent. This bill is designed to encompass incidences of rummaging through someone's car. However, accidental entry will not be criminalized. H.563 also creates a criminal violation for driving someone else's car when you "should have known" that you did not have permission to do so. Current law only covers those cases where a defendant knows they did not have consent of the owner (what we typically think of as auto theft), but there are instances when the person should have known that they didn't have consent. These changes will create an easier standard for prosecutors to meet in court.

Our retail theft bill, H.534, as passed by the House and Senate establishes increasingly severe penalties for repeat offenses of retail theft. We heard from numerous retail shop owners and employees that the brazenness with which a small group of offenders repeatedly steal items from their stores was possibly due to the fact that there is little to no accountability for these thefts. This bill addresses that concern, but we know that the larger issue is the current court backlog. A number of vital entities contribute to the criminal justice process and must be fully-funded in order to reduce the court backlog. House Judiciary strongly advocated for proper funding of the Vermont Judiciary, the Office of the Defender General, the Department of State's Attorneys and Sheriffs, as well as the Center for Crime Victim Services. To that end, House Judiciary also worked diligently with the above-named partners to craft a thoughtful new approach to restorative justice. H.645 creates a path – overseen by the Attorney General's Office – to accountability before alleged offenders enter the criminal justice system. Called "pre-charge diversion," this approach could lead to a reduction in the court backlog and, importantly, a higher sense of justice or closure for victims of crimes. Restorative justice centers victims needs, standing in stark contrast to the traditional criminal justice system, which focuses more on the offender. The bill also sets up improved data collection and takes baby steps toward improved geographic justice.

Two additional public safety bills came over to us from the Senate. S.195 addresses conditions of release and establishes a pre-trial supervision program aimed at helping defendants who have violated conditions of release or have not fewer than five pending cases against them. This would be a new step in Vermont, but several other states currently operate a pre-trial supervision Program. The main purpose of imposing bail is to encourage folks to engage with the court process, thereby

reducing the likelihood that the defendant would fail to appear. But bail can only be utilized under certain circumstances and presents obvious equity issues, as a person will remain in prison if they are unable to pay their bail. The pre-trial supervision program would offer various methods of monitoring (ranging from phone check-ins to electronic monitoring), as well as connection with pre-trial services, in an attempt to produce the same intended outcome as the imposition of bail without the financial incentive.

S.58 reads a lot like a miscellaneous bill, but its primary objective is to delay the implementation of Vermont's Raise the Age initiative. The Department for Children and Families (DCF) testified that they lack the workforce, IT infrastructure, and physical infrastructure (a secure juvenile facility) to properly implement the next phase of Raise the Age. The bill delays by one year raising the juvenile offender age limit to 19 years old. There is still a strong desire and commitment at DCF to implement this change, but they want to be sure they can do so responsibly, in a way that best serves the children in their care, as well as DCF employees. This bill also adds three offenses to the list of crimes for which charges against juveniles between the ages of 16 and 18 can start in criminal court (this list is called "the Big 12"), rather than family court. Other provisions in the bill include the addition of xylazine to the list of regulated drugs and the creation of a felony charge for selling xylazine. In addition, the bill eliminates the so-called ostrich defense (or willful blindness), which has allowed drug dealers to escape accountability by arguing that they did not know that the drugs they were selling contained fentanyl.

## STAY IN TOUCH

Your input and feedback provide invaluable perspective as we do our work.

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