

# 2021 Town Meeting Report

## Representatives Karen Dolan and Lori Houghton

Chittenden 8-2: Essex Junction



It is an honor to serve as your State Representatives. The 2021-2022 biennium began as no other like it, in total virtual mode with legislators “zooming in” from 150 locales across Vermont. We are mimicking the schedule of a normal in-person session, though the process of legislating remotely 5-7 hours per day is somewhat slower than normal. Our priority this session is to advance policies that will create an equitable COVID recovery plan to rebuild the economy in all 14 counties and help our families and communities thrive. This newsletter provides an update on the many bills under consideration at the State House in 2021. Please be in touch with us if you have any questions or to discuss issues.



### COVID-19 Response: Ensuring Lasting, Equitable Recovery

The COVID-19 pandemic has been an unprecedented public health and economic emergency. As of early December, approximately \$5 billion had come to Vermont, much passing directly to agencies and departments for specified COVID relief purposes. Within this amount was the \$1.25 billion that became the Coronavirus Relief Fund (CRF), from which the legislature had authority to appropriate dollars to target specific support of Vermonters and their communities.

Last week the Vermont House gave approval to nearly \$80 million in additional COVID-19 aid for Vermonters. H.315 provides critical assistance to working families and businesses struggling due to the pandemic. The intent of the funding is to address health disparities, increase social equity, and stimulate economic recovery. The relief package includes funding for: pandemic-related services for New American and immigrant communities, one-time stimulus checks for the poorest Vermonters on Reach Up, added investment in VT Farmers to Families Food Box program, improving the indoor air quality of school buildings for student safety, and new housing creation for homeless Vermonters.

We expect to hear of additional relief funding from Washington in the next few weeks.

### CONTACT INFORMATION

Rep. Karen Dolan  
[kdolan@leg.state.vt.us](mailto:kdolan@leg.state.vt.us)  
(802) 233-4434

Rep. Lori Houghton  
[lhoughton@leg.state.vt.us](mailto:lhoughton@leg.state.vt.us)  
(802) 373-0599

### Protecting Vermont's Small Businesses

The COVID-19 pandemic has had serious impacts on many small businesses, including the hospitality, events and tourism industries in particular. Over the past year, a number of federal and state grants and forgivable loans have helped to ensure the survival of these operations. However, some businesses (such as those started or purchased in 2020, or late 2019) have not qualified for nor been able to access this assistance due to program criteria. Last week, the Vermont House passed COVID-19 aid providing Economic Recovery Grants of \$10 million to help these Vermont businesses. This grant program recognizes that all businesses, whether new or smaller in size, play a critical role in the state's economic recovery by putting Vermonters to work.

### Revitalizing Downtowns

After the completion of a pilot program, the legislature is working with the Governor to devote \$5 million to create the [Better Places Program](#). This program would provide grants between \$5,000 and \$20,000 to improve the vitality of downtowns, with a focus on projects that can make an immediate impact to public spaces. Public area beautification, bike baths, use of vacant property and storefronts, enhancing farmers' markets or community gardens, and projects to support downtown performing arts are examples of ways these funds could be used to revitalize town centers. Municipalities, community groups, and nonprofits would be eligible to apply.

A further budget request has been recommended to add \$5 million to the [Downtown Transportation Fund](#). This fund supports many larger projects aimed at improving the infrastructure of downtown centers, including streetscape improvements, street lighting, parking and signage upgrades, and pedestrian and bicycle safety.

## **Ambitious Plan for Childcare System**

High-quality childcare is an investment in Vermont's future. By increasing access and affordability for Vermont's families, we help parents stay employed and contribute to their local economies. By increasing childcare worker wages, we can support and grow our early educator workforce. By prioritizing the well-being and development of our children, we are giving the next generation of Vermonters a head start to success.

[H.171](#) will make these investments a reality. The reforms offered in this bill are based on feedback from Vermont's parents, providers, employers, and community members. Not only does H.171 make childcare more affordable, it removes barriers to access, ensures fair wages for providers, establishes workforce development programs, and creates a study to identify future revenue sources.

We know that childcare is essential to keeping our communities strong. Meanwhile, Vermont's child care system is sorely in need of resources. H.171 is a monumental step towards funding child care in a way that reflects its true value to our state.

## **Meeting Mental Health Needs**

The Health Care Committee has spent significant time and focus on mental health in VT, taking testimony from the Dept. of Mental Health, designated agencies, and specialized service agencies. Mental health is an essential part of overall health for adults, children and families. The committee is exploring funding avenues to strengthen our system, as we know there will be increased demand as a result of pandemic-related stress.

H.315 starts our investment with over \$5M in aid for: housing supports for Vermonters struggling with mental health issues, additional case management support to help Vermonters who are in urgent need of the agencies' supports, aid to Peer Supported and LGBTQ organizations for immediate outreach to those affected by the pandemic, funding for increased data collection to improve health equity and for training and wellness support for our front-line workers.

### **Local Mental Health Resource: PATHWAYS SUPPORT LINE**

The Support Line is open 24/7 to provide confidential, nonjudgmental support and connection to all Vermonters.

Anyone can call (833) VT-TALKS or to text, dial (833) 888-2557

## **Transportation Modernization Act**

The [Transportation Modernization Act of 2021](#), introduced with 70 co-sponsors, moves climate and equity goals into the Transportation Budget Bill. The bill seeks to:

- Save Vermonters money
- Reduce climate pollution
- Expand existing programs like the state electric vehicle (EV) incentive and Mileage Smart.
- Make it easier for low- and moderate-income Vermonters to purchase low- and zero-emissions vehicles that are cheaper to fuel and maintain.
- Continue fare-free transit to eliminate transportation costs for people who might not be able to afford it otherwise.
- Expand the Complete Streets program and improve high-traffic corridors for cyclists and pedestrians.

These costs associated would ideally be funded through the increased federal monies that are coming to Vermont to support transportation. The committee will work with the Administration to find the right financial allocations for these goals.

## **Pensions: Bridging the Unfunded Gap**

State pensions are grabbing lots of headlines recently. Vermont oversees the pension management for three groups: state employees; teachers in pre-K to 12 schools; and municipal workers. The upkeep and viability of these funds is a vital oversight concern for the Legislature. In a [January report](#), Treasurer Beth Pearce recommended changes that would significantly reduce the \$4.5 billion unfunded pension and other retirement liabilities — for example, increasing employee contributions, or reducing cost-of-living adjustments for future retirees — but it's important to remember that her report is just a starting point. The Speaker has committed to bringing together all stakeholders to craft an equitable solution, and the Government Operations Committee has so far heard from the Joint Fiscal Office, Treasurer Pearce and key employee groups. The process of determining the best course of action will be time-consuming and laborious. Stay tuned.

### **COVID-19 VACCINE UPDATE**

The Health Department is working closely with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to distribute vaccines as they become available. You can learn more and sign up for weekly emails at:

<https://www.healthvermont.gov/covid-19/vaccine>