



March 2021 Legislative Report

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Dear Community,

Thank you for your trust in us, particularly through such an immensely difficult year. Your participation continues to be essential, and we appreciate it. As we legislate in total virtual mode you have been in our hearts and minds. This report is not all-inclusive, so please reach out to us about issues not shared here.

Critical Policy Goals:

- Creating an equitable COVID recovery plan that rebuilds the economy in all 14 counties
- Increasing affordable housing options for Vermont's working families
- Investing in the state's child care system to improve access, affordability and quality
- Expanding broadband service to rural communities for telehealth, education and remote work
- Crafting policies with a revised lens of racial and social equity that uplift BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, women, people with disabilities, and other vulnerable Vermonters

Representative Caleb Elder

Budget Adjustment – In January the House and Senate passed H. 138, an annual budget adjustment bill, with strong support. The legislation included investments to support the legislature's continued pandemic response. Some funding highlights include:

- Coronavirus Relief Funds for emergency food, hotel-housing for the homeless, and rental assistance
- Support to the Vermont State Colleges for additional expenses related to COVID-19
- Continuation of the Everyone Eats program through June 2021, providing healthy meals prepared by restaurants to food-insecure Vermonters
- Funding for technical assistance to implement the Global Warming Solutions Act of 2020
- Completion of broadband extension projects
- Partial re-location costs for Burlington High School

New COVID-19 Relief and Recovery – The Vermont House passed H. 315 on the final Friday before the Town Meeting break. This legislation includes nearly \$80 million in additional COVID-19 relief and recovery for families and businesses struggling due to the pandemic. The primary intent of the funding is to address health disparities, increase social equity, and stimulate economic recovery. The COVID-19 relief package, which heads to the Senate next for consideration, includes funding for:

- Small businesses that received no federal assistance
- Pandemic-related services for New Americans
- Community supports for those with mental health needs
- New housing creation for unhoused Vermonters

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Protecting Vermont's Small Businesses – The legislature has been working with the Governor's administration to create a \$10 million "gap" grant program to help businesses that have received minimal to no assistance. 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.

School Construction – Committee bill ([DR 21-0782](#)):

Update of the school facility standards and a statewide needs assessment survey for all school buildings, with a report on funding options due in December 2022.

Education Funding: The Weighting Study – While this work is starting in the Senate, House Ed is discussing various proposals regarding how to implement the recommendations of the December 2019 legislative study conducted by UVM ([Study of Pupil Weights in Vermont's Education Funding Formula](#)) and provide more equitable funding across the state.

Broadband: Supporting Rural Buildout – Committee bill ([DR 21-0185](#)) accelerates community broadband deployment throughout Vermont with: funding for pre-construction expenses, expanded grants and loans for building broadband infrastructure in unserved and underserved areas, a new workforce development program, and protections for Vermonters' privacy and unrestricted access to the Internet. This bill would bring over \$50 million of new capital to support the construction of community-based fiber assets in the most underserved parts of the state.

- Added investment in VT Farmers to Families Food Box program
- Improving the indoor air quality of school buildings
- Increased data collection to improve health equity
- Additional investment in the State pensions system

Childcare Expansion – Child care is essential for Vermont families, but even before the pandemic, 3 out of 5 of Vermont’s youngest children did not have access to the care they need. Covid-19 has only exacerbated the challenges for families and early childhood educators. H.171, an act relating to the governance and financing of Vermont’s child care system, was introduced this year in the House. With strong tri-partisan support, this legislation proposes to support a childcare system that is:

- **Accessible:** Children from all backgrounds and abilities will have access to high-quality child care when and where they need it.
- **Affordable:** No family will spend more than 10% of their income on child care.
- **High-quality:** Every child will be taught by qualified early childhood educators who are fairly compensated and well-supported.
- **Accountable:** The system will have well-coordinated and transparent governance, administrative, and accountability structures and resources.
- **Sustainable:** Stable, long-term funding for the system will have to be secured. When children have access to high-quality early childhood education, it can close or eliminate achievement gaps caused by generational poverty, structural racism, and social inequity.

Tax Structure Commission Report – As a new member of the House Ways and Means Committee, I have had the opportunity to hear from the three members of the Vermont Tax Structure Commission about their recently released report. The publication of this report comes after two years of review and study, and the commissioners recommend significant reforms. The Commission makes the following recommendations:

- Eliminate the tax burden/benefit cliffs.
- Establish an ongoing Education Tax Advisory Committee.
- Restructure the homestead education tax.
- Broaden the sales tax base.
- Modernize income tax features.
- Improve administration of property tax.
- Create a comprehensive telecommunications tax.
- Utilize tax policy to address climate change.
- Collaborate with other states so each state can build a fairer, more sustainable tax system.

None of these will be an easy lift, although some things (like collaboration with other states) are already happening to varying degrees. Anyway, I think it’s a thought-provoking list and I imagine these recommendation will help shape tax policy discussion in Montpelier in the coming years.

Weatherization: Energy Savings & Healthier Homes

– Increased support for accelerated weatherization programs, focusing on low and moderate incomes.

Transportation, [Transportation Modernization Act of 2021](#)

– Saves Vermonters money, reduce pollution, expand electric vehicle (EV) incentives and Mileage Smart, makes it easier for low- and moderate-income Vermonters to purchase low- and zero-emissions vehicles (cheaper to fuel and maintain), continue fare-free transit to eliminate transportation costs for people who might not be able to afford it otherwise, and expand the Complete Streets program and improve high-traffic corridors for cyclists and pedestrians.

Healthcare – In addition to COVID-19 supports: addressing the healthcare workforce crisis, healthcare disparities, and strengthening our community and peer mental health system, as well as healthcare bills introduced as noted below

Bills Introduced by Rep. Cordes

- [H. 108](#) (*Passed the House, in Senate now*) To clarify that Vermont Water Quality Standards (VWQS) apply to wetlands and discharges to wetlands, require evaluation of water quality impacts on waters and wetlands and an evaluation of alternative means of accomplishing the proposed action for activities subject to federal CWA section 401 certification.
- [H. 128](#) (*Passed the House, in Senate now*) An act relating to limiting criminal defenses based on victim identity
- [H. 287](#) To set minimum requirements for specified health care facilities’ patient financial assistance policies. It would also provide patients with certain protections against medical debt.
- [H. 353](#) Requires increased transparency and oversight of Pharmacy Benefit Managers and other processes that have contributed to hidden profiteering at the expense of our local/small business pharmacies and the people they serve. Also establishes statewide wholesale drug distribution system for Medicaid.
- [H. 388](#) Simplify the Vermont education funding model and transition from a property-based tax to an income-based tax. (*Rep. Elder is co-sponsor*)
- [H. 390](#) Use of Special Supplemental Nutrition for Women, Infants, and Children benefits at farmers’ markets.