

2021 Town Meeting Report

Kimberly Jessup



It is an honor to serve as your State Representative. 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 many 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 families and communities thrive. This report provides an update on some of the many bills under consideration at the State House in 2021. As always, please be in touch if you have questions or would like to discuss issues. -- *Kimberly Jessup*

Federal COVID Support

Since the early weeks of the pandemic in 2020, COVID-related dollars flowing to Vermont from Washington have been substantial. By early 2021, approximately \$6.5 billion is either in Vermont or en route, much passing directly to agencies 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 for Vermonters and their communities. Allocations ranged from assistance to dairy and non-dairy farms, working lands, state parks and to internet connectivity, health care stabilization, and child care and adult days; for a variety of economic business sectors, both for-profit and nonprofit, to UVM and the VT State Colleges system; from municipalities and pre-K-12 school districts to all manner of housing and justice-related entities. Use of CRF dollars had to follow strict federal guidance, until Washington unexpectedly changed that guidance at the very end of 2020. In response, on February 26th, the Vermont House passed H. 315 to provide \$80 million in focused relief to working families and businesses struggling due to the pandemic ([H.315](#)). The intent of the funding is also to address health disparities, increase social equity, and stimulate economic recovery. It is critical to note that all of this federal help is one-time money. Once we are on the better side of the pandemic, Vermont must stand on its own in support of Vermonters coping with residual and on-going hardships. While helping those in need now, we must also seek strategic investments that serve us over the long-term.

Supporting Broadband Buildout

Access to high-speed internet is essential to daily life. We use the internet to go to work, attend school, see a doctor, interact with the government, and connect with our community and the world. Yet the promise of modern communications has bypassed many communities in Vermont. The House Energy & Technology Committee has been crafting a comprehensive committee bill seeking to accelerate community broadband deployment throughout Vermont. Key elements include: 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. The 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. The legislation also establishes the Vermont Community Broadband Authority to coordinate and fund broadband buildout, to support Vermont’s regional communications union districts (CUDs) and their partners, and to advocate at the federal level for programs and policies that will accelerate the deployment of universal broadband in rural Vermont. It is also hoped that this “sets the stage” for future federal infrastructure investments that are under discussion. It is past time that Vermont makes significant progress on our goal of improved broadband connectivity.

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. Right now, people in Vermont age 65+ can make appointments to get vaccinated. To learn more or to receive weekly emails, go to: <https://www.healthvermont.gov/covid-19/vaccine>

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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 seeks to make these investments a reality. The reforms are based on feedback from Vermont's parents, providers, employers, and community members. Not only does H.171 seek to 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. Childcare is essential to keeping our communities strong, and H.171 is a step toward 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. Pathways Vermont Support Line, funded by the Dept. of Mental Health, has averaged 1,200 calls per month in the last year with a dramatic increase of calls during the COVID-19 pandemic. 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. COVID-19 has significantly increased the stress in all our lives and having these and other resources available is crucial.

Dept of Corrections (DOC) Investigation

The Corrections & Institutions Committee has taken testimony on a report produced by the law firm Downs Rachlin Martin (DRM) at the request of the VT Agency of Human Services. The report was the culmination of months of investigation into allegations of sexual harassment, misconduct, and abuse at the Chittenden Women's Correctional Facility. Despite clear guidelines in place since 2014, numerous misconduct allegations were reported. The DOC Commissioner wants to incorporate many of the DRM report recommendations in the state's correctional facilities and throughout the DOC. For example, this could include direct service staff wearing body cameras and taking pre-employment polygraph tests. DOC employees and incarcerated individuals need to know that issues are being uniformly addressed.

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 and rightfully so. 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 2021 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 House 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 clearly be time-consuming and laborious.

Weatherization: Energy Savings & Healthier Homes

Vermont has some of the most energy-inefficient housing stock in the nation. Addressing this issue can help our state meet its climate goals, save Vermonters money, improve our local economy, and help citizens be more comfortable and healthy in their homes. In cooperation with the Administration, the legislature plans to provide increased support for accelerated weatherization programs for a broader range of income levels. Weatherizing a home often pays for itself in less than five years and is a smart investment.