

# 2021 End-of-Session Report

## Kimberly Jessup



The 2021 session was certainly unique, both in terms of legislator time spent on Zoom and the vast infusion of federal aid that has come to our Green Mountain State due to the global pandemic. Of course, we will never forget the hundreds of Vermonters who lost their lives, nor those of us still navigating grief or diminished health. What is important for you to know is that we worked diligently this session to ensure that the billions of dollars coming into the state were put to immediate and effective use in response to the crisis. In addition, I advocated for numerous high-impact, once-in-a-lifetime investments you will read about here that will accelerate recovery with the aim of leaving no Vermonter behind. I look forward to connecting with you as face-to-face living kicks back in - please be well.

-- *Kimberly Jessup*

### Weighing in on Investments

Prior to adjournment, the legislature approved H.439, the state budget for FY2022, totaling \$7.35 billion. It includes allocations of \$599.2 million in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds and focuses on people: the COVID recovery of Vermonters, their communities and local economies. This budget positions the state and our community partners to effect transformational change moving forward with \$600 million more in ARPA dollars to spend by FY2025. Recognizing the unprecedented opportunity provided by these federal dollars, the budget includes a community-based engagement process to solicit Vermonters' input on investing in the future of our state. Outreach this summer and fall will include non-traditional public events that do not rely on public hearings or online surveys. As much as is possible, participation will be facilitated and traditional barriers removed. Vermonters' recommendations will be reported to the legislative committees for policy development beginning in early 2022. The Speaker of the House and President Pro-Tem of the Senate will lead this process. Please look for this opportunity to help invent our future together!

### Universal Access to Broadband

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted how 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 communities and the world at large. Unfortunately, the promise of modern communications has bypassed too many rural communities in the state and roughly 25 percent of Vermonters still lack access to broadband. H.360 dedicates \$150 million of federal stimulus funds to the construction of broadband infrastructure in the most underserved parts of the state. (The legislature anticipates spending a total of \$250 million for

broadband deployment over the next three years.) The bill includes funding for pre-construction planning and design costs, grants for building broadband infrastructure to unserved and underserved areas, and a new broadband workforce development program. The bill also creates the Vermont Community Broadband Board to coordinate and support Vermont's nine Communication Union Districts and their partners with the technical, legal, and financial assistance to accelerate the deployment of universal broadband service.. H.360 prioritizes the deployment of fiber ("future proof") infrastructure, giving Vermonters access to at least 100mbps download/100mbps upload service.

### Childcare: Essential to Economic Recovery

We know that child care is essential to supporting Vermont's families, communities, and economy. H.171 takes monumental steps towards reforming our childcare system and supporting the next generation of Vermont's citizens. 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 for financing a universal childcare system.

By expanding access and affordability for Vermont families, we help parents stay employed and contribute to our economy. By increasing childcare worker wages, we support and grow our workforce of early care and learning professionals. By prioritizing the well-being and development of our children, we give our youngest Vermonters a head start on success. Vermont's childcare system holds immense opportunities. H.171 delivers both the resources and commitments necessary to help realize that potential.

## **Preserving Public Pensions System for State Employees & Teachers**

The Legislature focused this session on putting our public pension system on a path towards long-term sustainability, so that teachers, troopers, and all state employees can rely on a well-funded, solvent system when they retire.

The goal is to set a process in motion that preserves the defined benefit model, because when properly designed and managed, this is the most affordable way to provide secure income in retirement. Legislators are balancing multiple commitments - one made to state employees and teachers - and another to Vermont taxpayers - who now face a \$5.6 billion unfunded liability that will continue to grow exponentially without action.

H.449 slowed down the process to engage more stakeholder voices. The legislation focused on governance changes that will amend the Vermont Pension Investment Commission (VPIC) to include more independent financial expertise. It also established the Pension Benefits, Design & Funding Task Force to meet this summer with a “report-back” to the legislature for putting the retirement systems on a sustainable path. Through a conference committee negotiation between the House and Senate, the task force was reconfigured to equalize the state (employer) and union (employee) representatives at the table.

The Legislature has reserved \$150 million of General Fund dollars (freed up by ARPA dollars), along with the annual ADEC payment of \$316 million for a total investment this year of \$466 million, a massive commitment for the legislature in a single year. Resolving this pension crisis in the short-term with robust participation from all stakeholders is the fair and responsible thing to do for all concerned.

## **Updating Vermont's Bottle Bill**

An update to Vermont's 50-year-old bottle bill passed the House this session. H.175 expands the types of containers subject to deposits and includes water bottles, wine bottles, hard cider and tea containers, and others. This bill will also increase the handling fees paid to vendors to promote the opening of more redemption centers. Containers recycled via the deposit system are cleaner and more valuable than if they go through the general recycling stream, and a greater percentage of them will be made into new containers. Glass, in particular, is much easier to manage as a recycled material if it goes through redemption centers versus a curbside bin.

## **Expanding Office of Racial Equity**

Legislators are hearing that Vermonters are not only dealing with one pandemic, but three urgencies: COVID, Climate and Systemic Racism. In addressing systemic racism, one of the glaring needs identified was bolstering personnel at the state's Office of Racial Equity. When this office was created and Xusana Davis hired as director, the legislature didn't know the extent to which these services would be used and requested. The workload has continued to grow, with the director being flooded by requests to sit on committees and boards, meet with Vermonters, review policies, and offer expertise to all three branches of state government. It became clear that the needs of the Office were far greater than one person could handle. To help, two positions were added to the Office of Racial Equity and passed in the budget, effective in the new fiscal year, July 1, 2021.

## **Affordable & Accessible Transportation**

Transportation infrastructure is something many people don't think about until it's not working, costs too much, is unsafe, or not dependable. This year's Transportation Bill appropriates millions of dollars to maintain safety and improve critical infrastructure like federal, state and town-owned highways, bridges and culverts. Financial support is also set aside to facilitate the forthcoming New York City-Burlington rail service, to ensure the long-term maintenance of the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail, and to support more than 40 bike and pedestrian projects. And for those who can't drive, bike or walk their way from “point A to point B,” various public transit initiatives have been set in place, including making “Zero Fare” on buses continue through June 2022.

## **Addressing Sexual Assault in Vermont**

One in five women have experienced sexual assault; one in three women have experienced sexual coercion; nine percent of high school girls in Vermont report having unwanted sex; students of color and LGBTQ students are statically more likely to be coerced to have sex. Moreover, only 230 of every 1,000 sexual assaults are ever reported and only five result in convictions. In response, the legislature passed H.183 to revise and clarify laws on consent to sexual activity, including the impact of alcohol consumption, to eliminate any confusion as to when consent to sexual activity has not and cannot be given. The bill also creates a Campus Sexual Harm Task Force to tackle the high number of sexual assaults that take place on our college campuses. The hope is that this bill starts to address the prevalence of sexual assault and coercion in our state and help bring about justice when it does occur.