

DESTINY THOMPSON, REGION 1, FIRST PLACE
“Substandard Housing in Vermont: The Price Renters Pay”

Many Vermonters living in substandard housing are faced with unsafe living conditions, which lead to extreme stress and numerous health issues. The state government should address the health and safety of rental properties in Vermont by creating a state-wide system where renters have recourse through professional, local support and impartial inspectors. The longer we wait to fix the problem, the larger the problem will become.

There are many different elements in a home that can be unsafe for renters, such as rodent infestations and mold, as well as the structural integrity of the property. The Rental Housing Health Code, which defines the minimum health standards for rental properties in Vermont, establishes clear responsibility for landlords to control pests and maintain the structural elements of the property. Neglecting to maintain a property exposes tenants to a variety of health risks. According to the Renters at Risk report by Tessa Horan, “having excessive moisture or poor ventilation in a home can harm mental and physical health” (12). Feeling unsafe creates extreme stress. Stress can affect a child's ability to attend and pay attention in school and an adult's ability to be successful at work or maintain a job.

The state of Vermont has a code which clearly dictates rules for landlords and tenants to follow regarding health and safety standards; it is clear, however, that these codes are not enforced. I propose there be a clear system for evaluation and accountability. A way for the Vermont state government to address these problems is to create a system with a single goal: to help renters and landlords deal with safety issues in a healthy and respectful way. The state system would arrange for impartial and unbiased inspectors to visit rental properties every year on a mandatory basis. This system would be successful in sending professionals to rental properties to determine problems and help renters and landlords find a way to remedy them. Maryellen Griffin, Vermont Legal Aid (VLA) Attorney, stated that while the VLA can address many immediate problems, the state cannot address every problem that comes their way (Dawson). Many renters living in substandard housing struggle to manage their housing issues due to lack of money or knowledge. It is imperative that a system be put in place that protects tenants and landlords. The problems related to substandard housing affect too many Vermonters for this current, insufficient system to continue.

A system like I have proposed would mean general well-being and a sense that the government cares about all of its citizens. A structured system of protection and accountability would lead to fewer missed school days and work days, which would save the government a substantial amount of money. Safe, affordable housing would mean less homelessness and a healthier population in our state. Many low-income Vermonters already feel as though their government does not care for them; we cannot afford for our citizens to feel this way any longer.

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ISAAC DOGGETT, REGION 2, FIRST PLACE
“To Cure An Epidemic”

ep·i·dem·ic
noun

A widespread occurrence of a disease in a community at a particular time.

Vermont is currently in the midst of possibly the greatest epidemic it has ever known, and few people even acknowledge that it fits the above definition. The beast known as opioid use disorder (OUD) has its claws around 15-20 thousand people in our state.¹ This life-ruining affliction claims around 110 lives a year in our state, making death by OUD more common than death by car crash.^{2,3}

Most Vermont systems that try to treat OUD are based on the concept of abstinence.⁴ Abstinence is simply not an effective or realistic way of treating this disease as it takes the average person eight years and four to five attempts at getting clean to achieve just one year of remission from OUD.⁵ So what is an effective way to treat OUD? How can our state effectively try and stop this disease? The answer is simply to treat it like the epidemic it is.

The first step in treating OUD as a disease is to use a method commonly used to treat diseases: prescribing medication to fight it. An effective drug used against opioids is buprenorphine. Buprenorphine is used to treat dependence and addiction to opioids.⁶ Research shows that when people use this drug they are 50% less likely to die of OUD.⁷ In Burlington, there is a program called Safe Recovery, which, among other things, provides access to buprenorphine. People who visit Safe Recovery and programs like it are five times more likely to enter treatment and three times more likely to stop using drugs altogether than people who don't.⁸

However, in our state, doctors need to complete a 10-hour training course to prescribe buprenorphine.⁹ Ironically it takes no additional training to prescribe opioids blamed for creating this epidemic.¹⁰ A 2016 study said that an overwhelming majority of doctors believe that people with OUD are more dangerous than the general public and that employers should be allowed to deny them work because of their addiction.¹¹ This prejudice affects their ability to treat their patients effectively as only a small percentage of Vermont doctors complete the 10-hour training course required to prescribe buprenorphine.¹²

Our state government needs to do something to treat OUD, and I believe the state needs to require every doctor to complete the buprenorphine training course in order to get their Vermont medical license. Doing this would let all doctors prescribe their patients with OUD buprenorphine. And, in addition to enabling all doctors to prescribe buprenorphine, it would also help our doctors overcome their prejudice and understand the rigors of addiction and how hard it truly is to escape the beast that is OUD. Great epidemics should have long ago become a thing of the past. Humans are smarter than diseases: we have found cures and medications for almost all of the great diseases of our time. So why not OUD?

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CHRISTOPHER ALFANO, REGION 3, FIRST PLACE
“A Small State, A Shrinking Population”

Buried in the northeast corner of the vast American landscape, Vermont possesses some of the premier geographical features and natural beauty in our nation. These factors make Vermont an appealing destination for tourists and young people looking to start families. Yet, hidden from the superficial glance are debilitating taxes and legislative restrictions, making Vermont a difficult place to live and do business. Ultimately, these inconveniences have overshadowed the incentives to move to our state, resulting in a gradual population decline and a limited workforce. Hence, to resolve Vermont's chronic population decline and incentivize young people to move to our state, the administration of Governor Phil Scott and the Vermont state legislature must take drastic measures.

According to the most recent decennial census, Vermont's population sits just below 624,000. Furthermore, the U.S Census Bureau indicates that there have been more deaths than births in our state since 2016. The census also confirms that more people left Vermont than moved to it in the past decade.¹ The result of Vermont's population decline is evident within the underwhelming magnitude of our state's workforce. To the frustration of many businesses, such as the iconic Vermont Country Store, Vermont's labor shortage has obstructed their hopes of expansion. Cabot Orton, the owner of the business, expressed his feelings to VPR when he stated, “We can't grow as much as we'd like to, because we can't find any more labor”.² Furthermore, the labor force Vermont does possess is one of the oldest in the nation, a statistic that coincides with the fact that Vermont's population is the third-oldest in the country.³

To resolve Vermont's population decline and aging workforce, the state legislature must lower property and income taxes. Especially considering that many Americans are in a financial predicament due to student loans, Vermont's high taxes repel young families. In fact, CBS News reports that Vermont has the 7th highest tax burden in the country.⁴ Lowering these taxes would make Vermont a more likely destination for young people.

Additionally, the Scott administration and state legislature can attract young entrepreneurs by revising Act 250. Enforced in 1970, the act aims to maintain Vermont's rural and environmental charm. Nonetheless, it requires business owners to endure a multi-year task of applying for and obtaining land use permits if they wish to make developments. Opposed to other states with more streamlined processes, Act 250 deters young entrepreneurs from Vermont. The revision of the act would incentivize American citizens to move to Vermont knowing that both lower taxes and the ease of expansion ensure that their newly-founded company can succeed.

For many Vermonters, it is difficult to grasp the fact that our state's population crisis must be resolved. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that young men and women moving to our state will fill job openings, and allow cherished Vermont businesses to thrive. In order to transition Vermont into an era of cultural and economic prosperity, it is crucial that the state legislature rectifies our dwindling population.

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DELIA MORGAN, REGION 4, FIRST PLACE
“Farming Feeds the Future”

When you think of Vermont, what do you think of? Vivid green mountains, enchanting fall colors, fields with sweet-smelling round bales, and red barns next to rolling pastures with grazing cows. Can you imagine a Vermont without those things? Would Vermont even be Vermont? This idea might be reality if not for dairy farmers. Much of the landscape you drive by is there because a farmer maintains it. 15% of the state is covered by dairy farms and the fields that provide their feed. That's 900,000 acres.¹

The economy in Vermont relies on dairy. Vermont's economy is small, just 0.2% of the U.S. economy, yet we produce more than 1% of the nation's dairy products. That's five times our economic share. Our state also produces 63% of the milk produced in New England.¹ Vermont depends on dairy to bring in 70% of the state's agricultural sales, not to mention the 360 million dollars in wages dairy provides Vermonters with each year.¹ Additionally, farming landscape shapes and drives tourism and recreational sports here, by keeping land open, and free of development.²

However, the dairy industry is plagued by numerous challenges, primarily volatile milk prices, climate change, and generational change.³ Due to these factors, last year there were 675 dairy farms in Vermont, compared to 1,015 a decade ago.⁴ This downward trend will in turn effect our economy via decreases in tourism, agricultural sales, jobs, and more. We cannot afford to ignore this problem.

The State can help the most in the area of generational change. Most Vermont dairy farmers are past middle age, and there are not enough young farmers to replace them as they retire. The dairy industry tries it's best to get youth involved, with programs like 4-H and judging teams, but it's not enough. If we want to have dairy farms around in the future, Vermont needs to raise a new generation of farmers for itself.

This is where Vermont's government comes in. The government should institute a mandatory program in schools, where children get to visit a farm on a regular basis (weekly or monthly). Bringing school children to visit and help on farms is an excellent way to build a strong work ethic and respect for farmers, which increases public support and recognition of dairy farmers and all the work they do. I first learned about 4-H through visiting a local farm once a week, with my 3rd grade class. I became an active 4-H member, and five years later I am considering a career in agriculture. If all children have an opportunity like mine, more of them will join agricultural groups, such as Future Farmers of America and 4-H, and become the farmers that help sustain the dairy industry, the economy, and Vermont for generations to come.

“ The future belongs to the few of us still willing to get our hands dirty.”⁵

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