



## Impact of Biden-Harris Initiatives in Vermont, March 14, 2024

I am honored to participate in the White House *Communities in Action: Building a Better Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont* event today. As Director of the [Center on Disability and Community Inclusion](#) (Vermont's University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research, and Service), I will share a few examples of the Biden-Harris administration's impact for the disability community from our brave little state of Vermont.

### Digital and Informational Accessibility

As a University Center, many look to us to provide data on disability in Vermont. Access to information is critical, and administration initiatives have significantly helped. In December the Office of Management and Budget noted many [federal websites were not fully accessible and released guidance](#) to make them more inclusive. We provide similar support in Vermont and this guidance is a major boost to our efforts and opening access to information.

Last month, the [U.S. Census Bureau chose to pause making changes to disability questions](#) on the American Community Survey. Many in the disability community were concerned the changes would exacerbate undercounting of people with disabilities. Our Center welcomes the opportunity to share our expertise and engage disabled Vermonters to give feedback.

### Health

The last few years have seen major investments from the administration in public health and health equity. Our Center applied for and put to use federal funding to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic: Providing [sensory supports to reduce anxiety for children getting vaccinated](#), distributing [free test kits](#), and outreach for access to mental health and school services especially for organizations serving girls, LGBTQ+ and BIPOC students with disabilities.

Many in Vermont are pushing for health equity. The administration's [proposed rule changes to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act](#) should be a significant help combatting discrimination.

### Education

The core of our Center's work is promoting excellence and inclusion for students with disabilities. Unfortunately, like many states, Vermont students of color and students with disabilities disproportionately experience seclusion and restraint.

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Center on Disability & Community Inclusion, University of Vermont

Supporting people with disabilities in accessing and thriving in the communities of their choice since 1974.

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A [high school student shared their experience](#) being secluded in school, “What I remember most about my elementary school was what we students called the ‘White Room.’ [...] I would sit there for what felt like ages, but most likely was often 10-30 minute periods. [...] I always felt a sense of frantic urgency to get out. I’d scream and cry and hit the door until I went numb and escaped into my imagination. [...] The first time I was placed there was my first day in kindergarten.” Dr. Melissa Houser, physician, director of [All Brains Belong](#) and co-chair of our Community Advisory Council testified, “Vermont has made so much effort over the past decade enhancing trauma-informed schools, trauma-informed health care, trauma-informed everything. And yet Vermont law currently allows for children to be traumatized.”

The U.S. Department of Education issued [guidance to stop discriminatory use of discipline](#). The administration should be aware that Vermont legislators and advocates are working on legislation to limit or end seclusion and restraint, similar to the [Keeping All Students Safe Act reintroduced last year](#) by Senators Chris Murphy (MD) and Bernie Sanders (VT).

Future prospects for Vermont students with disabilities were recently boosted with a U.S. Department of Education’s Rehabilitation Services Administration [Pathways to Partnership grant](#). Our Center is working closely with state agencies and disability rights groups to create new supports for youth to successful transition to adulthood after high school.

[We featured a young adult on our podcast](#) who shared the importance of federal investments for young adults with disabilities. Ocean Streeter has cerebral palsy and Autism Spectrum Disorder and shared, “after my diagnosis, maybe even before, I can’t be sure of the time, but I accessed TRIO, and like academic support services, [which were] actually very helpful, instrumental to my success and my graduation from Vermont State University...”

## Employment

In the disability community, Vermont may be best known for being the first state to close its sheltered workshops and stop paying people with disabilities below minimum wage. Some states followed suit, and others are debating it. The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights visited Vermont and [recommended ending the 14\(c\) waiver allowing subminimum wage](#). Currently the [Department of Labor is reviewing 14\(c\) and seeking community feedback](#). We know that some of that feedback includes very real fears that without subminimum wage, people with disabilities will lose their jobs and the social opportunities that come with employment.

Vermont advocates want you to know that when sheltered workshops ended, the agencies that ran them did not close. Providers shifted to community-based supported employment, and that led to a steady increase in Vermonters with disabilities working. Our Center published a [data brief](#) to share some of the employment data and history of these efforts in Vermont.

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