

2023 End of Session Report

Reps. Karen Dolan and Lori Houghton

City of Essex Junction: Chittenden 22



The 2023 legislative session is adjourned! Our work officially began on January 4th, when we returned for the first in-person opening week ceremonies in a few years. We passed significant legislation these past months to benefit Vermonters in all 14 counties, and this report provides highlights. We advanced critical policies in the areas of housing, child care, workforce development, and climate action. And we passed a balanced budget that meets the needs of Vermonters in each of our communities. Please reach out with questions and feedback. We look forward to connecting about our shared goal to create a Vermont that works for all of us.

A Balanced State Budget

On May 12th the House and Senate gave final approval to a balanced \$8.4 billion budget that funds our state government for the 2024 fiscal year. H.494 is a fiscally responsible, value-based budget that invests in top constituent priorities that help Vermonters across the state.

By investing in Vermont, we support our economy, our communities, and our families. We build the budget in a way that steps up to solve problems, rather than kicking the can down the road. This is a responsible approach to good governance — one that carefully weighs costs and benefits, makes tough choices, and then delivers sufficient dollars to meet the needs of today while moving toward a stronger future. Key investments include:

Housing (\$211 million)

The budget includes \$109 million to expand affordable housing and \$102 million for emergency shelter and support services for unhoused Vermonters, recovery housing, transitional housing for Vermonters exiting prison, and housing for young people exiting the foster care system.

Raising Provider Rates (\$99.7 million)

The budget also contains a major update to rates that support our medical and human services programs. These rates have been underfunded for years, causing a substantial shortfall for providers. We're boosting the rates for primary and specialty care, dental care, home health, nursing homes and residential care, adult day care, substance use and mental health, ambulance services and more. Increasing these rates will help us attract and retain workforce, meet demand for services, and free up hospital emergency rooms.

Childcare (\$76 million)

This investment — the first in a multi-year system transformation — will make childcare more affordable for families, raise rates to provide financial stability for childcare providers, and boost pay for our valued early childhood workforce.

Workforce and Higher Education (\$74 million)

The budget contains a \$47 million package to attract and retain workers in fields with severe shortages, including nursing, dental hygiene, teachers, psychiatric care and the skilled trades. It also funds UVM and Vermont State University, successful scholarship programs like 802 Opportunity and Critical Occupations, adult education, small farms and organic dairy producers, and allocates funds to help small business, rural industry, and working lands enterprises.

Human Services, Prevention, and Recovery

H.494 starts a \$20 million two-year pilot to expand the “hub and spoke” treatment system for opioid use disorder; funds a statewide expansion of mobile crisis units (to relieve pressure on hospital emergency rooms); and invests in recovery centers, recovery housing and after school, youth mentoring and substance misuse prevention programs. It also funds the Vermont Food Bank, Reach Ahead and Prevent Child Abuse Vermont.

To see all budget documents, go to:

<https://ljfo.vermont.gov/subjects/appropriations-and-budget/fy-2024>

Electric Vehicle Incentives in Vermont

Did you know that driving an electric vehicle (EV) is like paying \$1.50 per gallon for gas at the pump?

There are many reasons to drive an EV:

- save money on fuel and maintenance costs
- increased convenience by charging at night at home
- increase our energy independence and can be powered by renewable energy
- reduce noise pollution – EVs are incredibly quiet

Several incentives are available to help Vermonters drive electric, including a federal tax credit, electric utility programs, and an incentive from the State of Vermont. These can be combined to reduce the up-front price of an electric vehicle



Our statehouse in spring

by up to \$14,000 in some cases. The [Drive Electric Vermont website](#) has a calculator tool to help Vermonters determine their incentive eligibility.

Preventing Suicide

Vermont's suicide rate is higher than the national average. This public health crisis drove the legislature's work on H.230, a bill addressing suicide prevention. The vast majority of suicides in Vermont are completed with a firearm. A child that lives in a home with a gun has a 440% increased chance of suicide. These staggering statistics require action, and H.230 will save lives by reducing access to lethal means.

The bill requires a 72-hour waiting period for gun sales, a reasonable time period that will slow the impulsive actions that often lead to suicide. By creating penalties for negligent storage, children will be less likely to find unsecured guns. Household members will also be empowered to directly petition a judge for an Extreme Risk Protection Order so they may remove guns from a home when someone is in crisis.

With H.481, Vermont's Director of Suicide Prevention will develop and provide schools with a model for reducing suicides, investigate the role of eating disorders in causing suicide, and create services for members of the community should a tragedy occur.

Addressing Sexual and Domestic Violence

The House Judiciary Committee worked to address domestic and sexual violence during this session.

[H.45](#) limits a convicted abuser's ability to use the court system to continue harming a survivor. Called "abusive litigation," this can be achieved through frequent filing of motions or complaints that the survivor then needs to answer – costing them money, work time, and any sense of actual safety or distance from their abuser. After heart wrenching testimony from victims that just want to move on with their lives, this bill was voted out of committee with multi-party support. Having passed in the House and Senate, the bill heads to the governor's desk.

[H.41](#) allows community justice centers (CJCs) to receive referrals of DV/SV cases under specific conditions. As many as 80% of victims never report their abuse, sometimes because they fear the typical criminal justice process. Opening the door to a restorative justice approach, which is entirely victim-centered and focused on repairing harm, may lead more victims to seek relief.

Child Care and Early Childhood Education

The lack of access to affordable, high-quality early childhood care profoundly impacts Vermont and its economy. H.217 develops a blueprint for a significant investment in our children, families, and communities.

The bill increases state-funded financial assistance for children in child care; plans for the expansion of part-time pre-K to a full-time program for all 4-year-olds in Vermont; increases the reimbursement rates for community and home-based child care programs by 35%; and elevates and streamlines state-level oversight of early childhood education. This bill also provides a substantial increase to family home care providers, a critical component to solving the child care crisis.

This bill was supported by legislators across party lines, and it builds on the current system to ensure that all partners, families, schools, and early educators have the resources they need to best care for our youngest Vermonters. The bill increases the number of families who will not have any co-pay from 150% of the federal poverty limit to 175%. It also expands eligibility for middle-income Vermonters to 575% of the federal poverty limit. H.217 will infuse over \$140 million into the child care sector and, starting next year, will be funded by a payroll tax of 0.44% (employers pay 0.33% and employees pay 0.11%). H.217 passed by a vote of 118-27 and will have a lasting impact on the lives of Vermont families and our economy.

Climate and Environment Action

The FY24 budget contains significant climate and environmental investments. It invests \$9.8 million as a state match for the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) Drinking Water and Clean Water State Revolving Funds. \$8 million is allocated for assessment, planning, and cleanup of contaminated "brownfield" sites and \$6.1 million will be used to address septic, water, and energy needs of older VT housing stock. The state aquatic invasive species prevention grants program received \$500,000 in stabilization funding and a position was also funded to support this program. The budget also provides the Agency of Natural Resources funding to be used as incentives to replace high global warming potential refrigerants and funding to support groundwater remediation due to PFAS contamination (per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances).

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To see our voting records, read bills, and watch the action go to:
legislature.vermont.gov