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Budget cuts deprive Vermont residents of dignity; disability and workers' rights groups call for a budget based on human rights

Burlington/Montpelier, VT – In response to the State Administration's so-called "Public Budget Forum," held across VIT sites on the evening of October 28, the Vermont Workers' Center (VWC) and Green Mountain Self Advocates (GMSA) point to the failure of Vermont's budget and tax policy to meet the fundamental needs of the people of Vermont and to enable people's democratic participation.

"These budget hearings ignore the serious disconnect between the budget process and people's lives", says James Haslam of the Vermont Workers' Center. "More and more people in our state live in poverty, are homeless and go hungry, even though our state has enough money to meet everyone's fundamental needs."

The groups point out that the typical Vermont family is now financially worse off than it was ten years ago, despite growth in both the gross State product and total personal income in Vermont. The most basic measure of unmet need in Vermont, the number of people living in poverty, has increased continuously for the last eight years. Yet this summer, shortly after the legislature adopted a 2015 budget, the governor announced a 2% budget cut, followed by instructions earlier this month to cut another 5%, which would lead to substantial cuts in public services at a time of increasing need.

"Year after year, our state has placed less and less value on everyone living their lives with dignity, free from poverty and with access to the services and supports they need," says Karen Topper, of Green Mountain Self Advocates, "This is not right. The budget is a moral document; it raises money for what we value."

Over the past decade, many essential public programs and services in Vermont have been cut. This has adversely affected both people in need of support (e.g. only 25% of individuals eligible for developmental services receive them) and low-wage workers providing those services, who struggle to make ends meet.

"The way we make our state budget is not working for the people," explains Haslam. "We need an entirely different way of making budgets: a People's Budget that starts with people's needs and then democratically decides how to raise the money to meet those needs." [1]

Karen Topper agrees: "Our State has an obligation to assess and address unmet human needs, which is why the budget process must begin with an assessment of people's needs, not with a directive from the Governor to cut public services and programs."

VWC and GMSA remind the Governor and his Administration of the requirement in state law to adopt a budget that addresses people's needs. According to Vermont law, the budget has "to

address the needs of the people of Vermont in a way that advances human dignity and equity.” [2] This legal provision was enacted in 2012 as a result of efforts by the People’s Budget Campaign, spearheaded by the Vermont Workers’ Center and Green Mountain Self Advocates. Both groups see today’s Budget Hearings as a perfunctory gesture that merely paid lip service to the public participation requirement for the budget process, and instead call on the Administration to respect and implement the budget law in a meaningful way.

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NOTES FOR EDITORS

1] People’s Budget fact sheet: <http://bit.ly/1vc0uzm>

People’s Budget short video: <http://bit.ly/1yGQy4L>

2] Vermont statute 32 V.S.A. § 306a: <http://bit.ly/1wbkmgE>