

Gov. Shumlin signs update of law to remove hurtful language

Mar. 21, 2014 |



Kyle Moriarty thanks Gov. Peter Shumlin on Friday for signing a bill that eliminates words from state law that are disrespectful to people with disabilities. He delivered his message by typing it out and displaying it on a screen.
TERRI HALLENBECK/FREE PRESS

Written by **DAVE GRAM** Associated Press

MONTPELIER — Stirling Peebles stood before Gov. Peter Shumlin, a crowd of lawmakers, disability rights advocates and media people Friday and told how words can hurt.

“We are human beings and we want to be respected just like you,” said the Montpelier resident, who has Down syndrome. “When we hear bad words it’s like a knife ripping through our hearts,” she added.

Such words as “lunatic” and “feeble-minded” are being edited out of the Vermont state law books under a bill Shumlin signed into law Friday.

The bill “gets rid of language that is both antiquated and disrespectful to people with disabilities,” Shumlin said.

The signing came after a long effort in which a group of advocates and state officials went through the statutes and updated them. Thousands of changes were made, said Susan Wehry, commissioner of the state Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living.

One target for change was a law on the books that said a marriage could be annulled if it was determined that either spouse was a “lunatic” or an “idiot.” References to “the mentally retarded” are being changed to “people with intellectual disabilities.”

Key support for the changes came from Green Mountain Self Advocates, a group of Vermonters with disabilities who have become a frequent presence around the Statehouse.

“This bill helps us get out the message that we must put the person first,” said the group’s president, Randy Lizotte. “Like at my job, they think of me as Randy, not just a person with a disability.”

The American Association on Mental Retardation changed its name to the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities in 2007. President Barack Obama signed legislation striking “mental retardation” and similar terms from federal health, education and labor laws in 2010.