



# STORY + VIDEO + PHOTOS: Governor signs bill purging offensive language from state statutes

**TOM BROWN** MAR. 21, 2014, 6:12 PM [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

It was all about the “r” word for people with disabilities and their supporters Friday at the Statehouse.

While many wore T-shirts bearing a circled “r” with a slash through it representing a word they would like to expunge, it was another “r” word they wanted to promote – respect.

Gov. Peter Shumlin was joined by dozens of intellectually disabled people in signing a bill, [S.27](#), which scrubs current state statutes to remove language deemed offensive and calls for the use of respectful language going forward.

The “r” word the group wants to cull from the lexicon is “retarded,” which appears at least 75 times in 309 pages of statute changed by the bill. The group and lawmakers stressed that words like that are hurtful and do not acknowledge the respect that every Vermonter deserves. The offensive word was replaced by “intellectually disabled” in the Respectful Language bill.

Sen. Anthony Pollina, P/D/W-Washington, who championed the bill along with Rep. Patsy French, D-Randolph, said the measure was more than symbolic.



From left, Stirling Peebles, Sen. Anthony Pollina, Randy Lizotte, Karen Topper and Gov. Peter Shumlin address a news conference Friday in Montpelier. Photo by Karen Schwartz/Vermont Development Disabilities Council

“Keep in mind that in this country, and certainly in this state, we have made it unacceptable to use the “n” word, and I think we all know what that word is,” Pollina said. “And as of the passage of this bill, it’s now going to be unacceptable to use the “r” word, and it’s significant that we’re doing that.”

In all, 29 of the state’s 33 statute titles included a change, advocates said. One outdated passage that was changed read: “Insane person’ shall include every idiot, non compos, lunatic and distracted person.”

The bill, signed on World Down Syndrome Day, was promoted by Green Mountain Self Advocates, an organization run by people with developmental disabilities, which began work on the project in 2010.

Karen Topper, statewide coordinator for GMSA, said the bill is important because “people with disabilities are harassed at a much higher rate” than others. She said changing the language in statute is unlikely to change people’s habits on the street but is important nonetheless.

“Using language that is disrespectful just fits into a pattern of violence against people with disabilities,” Topper said.

Several people with developmental disabilities spoke on behalf of the bill Friday, with many sharing how they have been affected by unkind words and wish to be viewed simply as equals.

“Respectful language and the treatment of people with disabilities go hand in hand,” Kyle Moriarty, a disability educator at GMSA who has autism, said using a type-to-voice translation device. “The tone we have set with this legislation is an amazing step toward

equality for people with disabilities in the state of Vermont. The thing about respectful language is that it is about more than just words.”

In addition to Green Mountain Self Advocates, the Vermont Coalition for Disability Rights, Vermont Center for Independent Living, Vermont Psychiatric Survivors, Disability Rights Vermont and the Legislative Council helped craft the bill.



Gov. Peter Shumlin holds the 309 pages of changed in Vermont statutes during the signing of S.27 on Friday at the Statehouse. Photo by Karen Schwartz/Vermont Developmental Disabilities Council