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Law replaces antiquated language in statutes

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MONTPELIER — Advocates and disabled Vermonters were on hand Friday for the signing of a bill that replaces antiquated and hurtful language in Vermont's statutes.

Gov. Peter Shumlin signed S.27 in his ceremonial State House office as advocates and disabled Vermonters cheered.

"What we love about Vermont and what we cherish the most is that we're a state where we're inclusive, we take care of each other, we care about each other and we ensure that everybody is a part equally of the Vermont family that makes this state so great. Our greatness is defined by our diversity," Shumlin said.

The bill removes from statutes wording that discriminates against "Vermonters who are doing extraordinary things in this state," according to Shumlin. No longer will some Vermonters be referred to as idiots or imbeciles. Other phrases, like "mental retardation," "mentally defective" and "feeble minded" are being replaced with "intellectual disability."

Max Barrows, an outreach coordinator with Green Mountain Self-Advocates, said the law was an important issue for the group. He and others "understand there is freedom of speech" and people may still use hurtful language, but the law will help set the tone for what is appropriate, he said.

"We get it that the law will not change people on the street from using language that is disrespectful, but the important point here is that the language used in Vermont state law sets a precedent of what is acceptable and proper use of language," Barrows said.

"It is not just about changing the words we use in our laws, it is about dignity and respect for people with disabilities," he said.

People with disabilities want to be seen as more than their disability, Barrows said.

"We want people to see us as people and not what you just see at first, which may be our disability," he said. "We want you to presume competence. Don't make assumptions about what someone can or cannot do. Give the person an opportunity to express who they are."

Randy Lizotte, president of Green Mountain Self-Advocates, noted that "words

can lift you up or put you down." The new law will help set a new tone, he said.

"It helps get the message out to people without disabilities to know that we are people too. We have the same dreams and wants as everyone else," he said. "This bill helps us get out the message that we must put the person before the disability."

Susan Wehry, commissioner of the Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living, said the effort to pass the law began with the simple goal of replacing the word "retardation."

It soon grew into a project that led to thousands of changes in 29 of the state's 33 statutes.

"This bill started with a mission and just exploded," she said.

Sen. Anthony Pollina, D-Washington, said many Vermonters with disabilities gave "incredibly passionate and articulate testimony" to lawmakers about the need for the changes. He said their courage spurred lawmakers to take on the expansive effort to revise state laws.

"There are Vermonters who every day have experienced language and words that have been disrespectful, hurtful and demeaning to them," Pollina said, "and I think it's hard for a lot of us to understand what it's like to go through life being confronted with that kind of demeaning language and those kind of hurtful words."

He added, "This is more than just about words. This is very much about respect and inclusion and respecting all Vermonters for who they are and not what we think they are."
