

Preface

Sixty-three years ago today, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights established, for the nations of this world, a common definition of their responsibilities to the people of the world. In doing so, the Declaration posed a challenge to those who hold power in governments – a challenge to end the suffering and the waste of human lives caused by violence, oppression, poverty and other forms of injustice.

Each year, the Vermont Workers' Center recognizes and celebrates this day, and we recommit ourselves to realizing and fulfilling a vision of social and economic justice. We recommit ourselves to bringing people together to utilize the power of collective action to build and strengthen our communities. We recommit ourselves to changing unjust power relationships. And we recommit ourselves to holding those in positions of power accountable to us.

1. Introduction

In the spring of 2008, the Vermont Workers' Center launched a statewide campaign called Healthcare Is a Human Right. That campaign grew out of the persistent failure of efforts to fundamentally change Vermont's broken healthcare system. We recognized that, in order to successfully effect change, it would be necessary not just to make compelling policy arguments but also to build an unprecedented level of grassroots power. In three and a half years, the Healthcare Is a Human Right campaign has demonstrated that the combination of a human-rights-based policy framework and a commitment to real grassroots organizing can effectively counterbalance the influence of private interests – often wealthy and thus politically powerful – and restore a focus on the public good. This campaign has made it possible for the voices of the 99%, demanding social and economic justice, to be heard and for human rights principles to be embodied in law.

An organization based on grassroots organizing – ordinary people talking with one another – cannot fail to notice the other causes of the suffering in our communities. As members of the Vermont Workers' Center struggled together with our neighbors in tropical storm Irene's toxic mud, we recognized the ongoing, underlying crisis – the daily struggles that many members of our communities have to endure to sustain a life of dignity. "Crises" like Irene's deluge reveal the human rights crisis faced every day by the poor, the elderly, people with disabilities and, increasingly, lower- and moderate-income people generally.

In working for public policy that treats healthcare as a human right, Vermonters have deepened their understanding of the root causes of the human rights crisis that we face. We see clearly that surrounding our broken healthcare system – in the United States and in Vermont – stands the monumental failure of government generally to respect, protect and fulfill the human rights of its people. At the center of government's failure to foster economic and social justice are budget and tax policies that fail to put people first. With the unprecedented concentration of wealth by the 1% has come a corresponding failure of democracy: government that increasingly serves the interests of that powerful minority. So, half a year before we began occupying Wall Street, thousands of Vermonters joined together on the lawn of our statehouse to begin their struggle for a government that puts people first.

The Healthcare Is a Human Right campaign put Vermont in the position of leading the country in establishing healthcare as a public good. But we require much more, if all of our human needs are to be met and our human rights fulfilled. We require government that prioritizes the needs of its people. We require – and so we demand – a people's budget, a budget focused on satisfying the needs of the people of Vermont, with revenue policy that follows from a real assessment of what it would take to meet those needs. On May Day, 2011, we raised the Put People First banner, and beneath it, beside the Healthcare Is a Human Right campaign, the People's Budget campaign took its first steps.

2. Methodology

With a statewide network of organizing committees built through the Healthcare Is a Human Right campaign, members of the Vermont Workers' Center began working to understand Vermonters' other unmet needs, besides healthcare. We developed a survey and expanded our outreach efforts – canvassing, tabling, holding community meetings and working with allied organizations and other partners – in an effort to assess the state of Vermonters' human rights.

This preliminary report is based on the results of the first round of one-on-one surveys from all across the state. In this first round, members of the Vermont Workers' Center interviewed a total of 228 people, and while we did not expect to reach a representative sample of the population, our respondents came from all walks of life. We talked with people from all parts of the state – from Derby to Bennington – and with people of all ages (our oldest participant was 92 years of age). In addition, 150 people participated in 6 community meetings held in Barre, Newport, Middlebury, Bennington and Burlington. Information gathered at these meetings was not included in our quantitative analysis but helped us validate the survey data. In quantifying the responses to the survey questions, wherever appropriate we calculated percentages based

on the number of people answering a question. Throughout the report, we added direct quotes from participants, drawn from their responses to open-ended survey questions.

We supplemented our survey findings with other publicly available data about Vermonters' fundamental needs and the policies enacted by our elected representatives.

Through the coming months, the Vermont Workers' Center will continue to speak with Vermonters about their unmet needs and unfulfilled human rights, as our movement grows and the commitment of our new members deepens. We will present our final report early in the 2012 legislative session.

“This kind of survey needs to be done everywhere, and people need to read them.”

3. Vermonters' Unmet Needs

To enable us to live dignified lives, we need to be able to eat healthily, have a home, stay healthy, learn and make a living. In other words, being human require an adequate standard of living, free of poverty and with all our fundamental needs met. In our state, and elsewhere in the United States, not everyone has been able to live with dignity and meet their needs. A growing number of Vermonters have been left behind, even before the economic crisis began and tropical storm Irene ravaged our vulnerable communities.

We know from statistics that poverty persists in Vermont, and we also know that the gap between people who can just about make ends meet and the wealthiest Vermonters has been steadily increasing. But what does that gap mean in practical terms? How do Vermonters themselves describe their daily realities? Our personal interviews, along with discussions in community meetings, offer a glimpse into the real lives of Vermonters.

“We have enough money as a society to cover the basic needs of all.”

Our survey found that 7 in 10 Vermonters are struggling to meet their fundamental needs because of Vermont's economic and flood crises. This large majority suggests that the problem of making ends meet may be far greater than official statistics show. Moreover, almost a third of Vermonters polled had always found it hard to meet their needs, even before the current well-publicized crises. Our surveying did not deliberately target poor people; and the findings show that the economic crisis has had a widespread impact on Vermonters lives. Three

quarters of all people surveyed not only struggled with meeting their own needs but also knew others who have had similar experiences.

Public data confirms that many people had to live with lower incomes last year. In 2011 Vermont median household income fell by 6.1% – to around \$49,406 – a larger decline than in any other U.S. state, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey. The number of those people most affected by this downturn has also increased: Vermont's official poverty rate – incomes of up to \$10,890 per year for a single person or \$18,503 for a three person family – climbed to 12.7%, an increase of 1.3%. Another 5% of Vermonters were very close to poverty, pushing the number of poor or near poor people closer to 1 in 5 Vermonters. Across the United States, a recent Gallup survey found that people's ability to satisfy fundamental needs is now worse than at any time throughout the economic crisis.

According to our survey, older people – people over 65 – had greater difficulty meeting their needs than people 30 or younger. This pattern is also reflected in the number of participants who reported problems accessing services for older people and services for those with disabilities. Economic struggles tend to be particularly challenging for people already facing inequalities because of their age, disability, gender or other factors. The more difficult it becomes for people to meet their needs, the less independence they are able to enjoy in their daily lives. A lack of access to jobs, housing and healthcare, along with other needs, may force people to endure undignified or even abusive relationships.

lack of livable wage jobs

The number one need of a majority of Vermonters surveyed is getting a job that pays a livable wage. More than 7 in 10 Vermonters that we spoke with have held a job that did not pay a livable wage or were unemployed at some point during the last few years.

“People need to live and be able to support their families.”

Over 12% of Vermonters were unemployed in 2010, according to the broadest measure of unemployment, which includes discouraged workers who have dropped out of the labor force and people who are working part time but seek a full-time job. Moreover, even those who work full-time often do not earn enough to make a living. The livable wage in Vermont for two-income families without children is \$12.17 per hour. This number represents the minimum earnings needed to meet fundamental needs; yet many Vermonters earn less than that. At the same time, some people earn much more: Vermont was one of nine U.S. states in which income inequality increased between 2009 and 2010, and even throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, income inequality grew faster in Vermont than in any other state but Connecticut.

lack of access to healthcare

Access to comprehensive healthcare – including dental, vision and mental health care – was the second most important need reported by respondents to our survey. More than half of Vermonters that we spoke with have had difficulties accessing needed healthcare and medications due to cost. Cost barriers were even greater for those seeking dental care: nearly 6 in 10 Vermonters polled were struggling to get needed dental care.

After the Vermont Workers' Center's healthcare survey in 2008, the continuing crisis of unmet healthcare needs comes as no surprise. The extraordinary barriers to accessing needed care, and the injustice of selling care as a commodity, were some of the principal factors that inspired the Healthcare Is a Human Right Campaign. The breakthrough achieved in May 2011 with the passage of Act 48, Vermont's universal healthcare law, means that Vermont is now on the path toward meeting people's healthcare needs. Yet until 2017, when the publicly funded system of comprehensive care for all Vermonters will become possible, access to healthcare is likely to remain difficult for many Vermonters.

lack of access to healthy food

Access to food was the third most important need of Vermonters, according to the survey. Nearly 7 in 10 Vermonters that we spoke with had to cut back on healthy food or relied on free groceries or food stamps.

Vermont tied Alabama for the highest increase in food insecurity during the past ten years. Our state is ranked 9th hungriest in the country, with approximately 40,000 people suffering from hunger. 88,000 Vermonters are officially considered "food insecure". Nearly one sixth of Vermont's population relies on food stamps, while many more – including 12,290 children – depend on food shelves each month.

lack of safe and affordable housing

Housing was another important need that the Vermonters we we spoke with were struggling to meet. After the flood crisis, which directly affected some of our respondents and devastated mobile home communities, access to safe and affordable housing became an even greater challenge. More than half of respondents had difficulty paying their rent or mortgage. Over a fifth reported difficulty paying to heat their homes. Many mentioned that fuel assistance had been cut and suggested that Vermont should do more to ensure that everyone can get safely through the winter.

Public data confirms that many Vermonters pay too much of their income for housing. 47% of renters and 38% of owners with mortgages pay more than 30% of their income for housing, which makes their housing, according to an official definition, unaffordable. Vermont ranks as the 17th worst state in the nation for rental housing affordability. Meanwhile, much of publicly assisted rental housing is at risk, with 7,000 affordable rental units projected to be lost over the next decade. At the same time, homelessness in Vermont continues to grow. A recent estimate counted over 2,500 people who were homeless in Vermont.

lack of access to quality education

Half of Vermonters that we spoke with had difficulty accessing higher education or struggled with student debt. Public data shows that the average student debt in Vermont is the sixth highest in the country, and that over two thirds of all Vermont graduates carry a debt.

While higher education is a particular challenge in Vermont, all levels of the school system are affected by funding shortages. 1 in 3 Vermonters that we spoke with reported a lack of resources in public schools that put quality teaching and support for students at risk. In fact, schools, libraries, vocational training programs and childcare were among the top public services that had experienced cuts, according to respondents. Many respondents called for additional services and support in these areas. With regard to child care, for example, the average cost for one child was \$712 per month in 2010, which means a person earning \$12 per hour would have to work 59 hours per month just to pay for child care.

lack of social security

We asked Vermonters specifically about services for older people and people with disabilities. Even though only 1 in 10 of respondents who gave their age was over 65 years old, a fifth of all survey participants reported difficulty getting services for older people or for people with disabilities. This difficulty accessing services poses significant challenges to the dignity and independence of older people and people with disabilities.

Although we did not specifically ask how Vermonters who become unemployed – or who lack sufficient sources of income for other reasons – cope with meeting their needs, some respondents expressed concerns about cuts to General Assistance and Reach Up programs, as well as Social Security and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI).

lack of public transportation

The survey exposed how difficult it is for many Vermonters to meet their needs when they lack access to transportation. More than 4 in 10 respondents reported difficulty getting to their

work, school or doctor because they could not afford or simply lacked transportation. A majority of the Vermonters that we spoke with also expressed great concerns about environmental degradation and climate change, and many suggested expanding public transportation in Vermont.

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“We need to care, because everyone matters.”

With regard to all fundamental human needs, Vermonters clearly face serious struggles that imperil our ability to live our lives with dignity. The findings of our survey show how serious the situation is for many people in Vermont. This situation is particularly shocking because Vermont tends to see itself as leading other states in its commitment to promoting the well-being of its people. Over the past few years, we have learned that our broken healthcare system has led to a human rights crisis, and the Healthcare Is a Human Right campaign was founded to change that system. But Vermont's human rights crisis appears to extend far beyond healthcare – encompassing access to food, housing, jobs, education and other human needs.

4. Vermonters' Rights Denied

Human rights follow from human needs. We join together in communities to satisfy our needs, so that we can survive and flourish as human beings. Democratic government is the result of our joining together in communities, so the fundamental role of government must be to protect and fulfill our human rights – to make it possible for us to meet our human needs.

Our human rights, based on our human needs, include: healthy food, housing, health and healthcare, education, a job with dignity, social protection and security (if we become unemployed, sick, disabled or otherwise unable to support ourselves, we are guaranteed an income that enables us to meet our needs), the right to organize (such as in labor unions, tenant associations and other groups), and the right to a healthy environment.

In order to enjoy these rights, we also need transportation to get to our doctor, our job or our school; and we need childcare to be able to work full-time. Moreover, it is important that we are able to participate in decisions about how our rights are realized, and we must have ways of challenging such decisions.

Our state provides public services, infrastructure, public jobs and benefits, funded by contributions from the people. These services are supposed to meet the needs of our

communities and help to protect and fulfill our human rights. But in recent years public services, benefits and public jobs have been cut, leaving many Vermonters to fend for themselves.

the impact of budget cuts

One year ago, on Human Rights Day 2010, the Vermont Workers' Center published its first People's Budget Report. We interviewed non-profit service providers that relied on public funding to support people's housing, food and education needs and that served older people and those with disabilities. We asked them how Vermont's budget policies had impacted public services and jobs, and how these policies had affected Vermonters' ability to meet their fundamental needs. Our research found that the state had cut essential services and jobs despite rising need among Vermonters. Disadvantaged and vulnerable groups had suffered most from these cuts to services, benefits and jobs in a time of economic crisis. These cuts contributed to an increase in inequity and a decline in Vermonters' economic and social rights. Specifically, we found that the quantity and quality of services available to Vermonters had been reduced, due to the government's funding decisions, job losses and restructuring at state agencies.

Undeterred by the state's growing inability to meet people's fundamental needs, in 2011 the administration proceeded to propose nearly \$70 million in additional cuts to human services, and legislators largely concurred. "Containing costs" remained at the top of the administration's agenda, and for the forthcoming 2013 budget, agencies have been instructed to make even deeper cuts.

The service providers we spoke with last year presented a dire picture of the impact of budget cuts on human lives and warned about growing inequality and impoverishment if the focus on cutting spending continued. The Vermont Workers' Center wanted to know to what extent this picture reflected people's experiences in their daily lives. Therefore, this year, we feature the voices of Vermonters, speaking out for themselves – through the survey and in our many community meetings across the state – about the public services they use and need.

What we have heard is cause for grave concern: more than half of the Vermonters that we spoke with have been affected by cuts or reductions in public services and public benefits programs.

“People should get what they need to be able to live.”

Vermonters were particularly concerned about healthcare and food stamp programs, with many people experiencing cuts to those programs. Since both healthcare and food are among

Vermonters' top priority needs, as reported above, it appears that state policies have not only been unsuccessful at meeting those needs but also, through cuts in services, have further restricted access to healthcare and food. This failure was foreshadowed by the findings of our last report. For example: last year, the privately run but publicly subsidized Catamount Health program became less accessible to people when it doubled the per-person deductible and increased co-pays. This year, healthcare was at the top of the list of services that our respondents wanted to see restored and expanded. Last year, we reported that the number of Vermonters relying on the food stamp program almost doubled since the beginning of the recession, and staff cuts at the implementing state agency resulted in long waiting lists, lost applications and incorrectly terminated benefits. This year, 7 in 10 survey participants told us that they had to cut back on healthy food or needed some form of food assistance.

“[Policymakers] should live our lives for a week, with the income we live off, to understand what it means to be struggling to meet our families’ needs.”

Other key services and programs that suffered from cuts, according to the Vermonters that we spoke with, were education and fuel assistance. Last year, service providers told us how cuts to the state's education budget reduced the funding available in each school district and led to a reduction in teaching and support staff at public schools. This year, one third of respondents expressed concern about the lack of resources in schools, which threatened to undermine their children's education. Last year, we noted that Vermont spent less than any other state on higher education and that tuition had increased substantially over the past few years. This year, half of our respondents reported difficulty accessing higher education or struggling with student debt. With regard to fuel assistance, last year we reported severe cuts to the federally funded fuel assistance program, with further cuts predicted. This year we found that over a fifth of the people that we spoke with were struggling to pay for heating their homes.

“[There is] no excuse [for not meeting our needs] when we have such excess resource and money in the hands of few people.”

the impact of inequitable taxation

Vermont's budget policy and revenue policy go hand in hand, and both cause hardship to lower- and moderate-income people. When not enough money is raised to provide necessary public services, those who rely on these services the most are the ones feeling the pain. When taxes are not sufficiently based on a person's ability to pay, then those with lower incomes are most affected.

The current mix of sales, property and income taxes in Vermont contributes to increasing inequity. The state tax liability for individuals with incomes of \$1 million has declined by 64% since 1968. The top 5% of wealthiest families now pay an average of 7.5% of their income in state and local taxes, while the poorest 20% pay 8.2%. Middle-income families pay the most taxes: an average of 9.4% of their income. Vermont's sales tax is the most regressive tax on the books, with low-income Vermonters paying 5.3% of their income and the wealthiest only 0.3%. This inequity means that Vermont is distributing money upwards to wealthier people, in addition to depriving Vermonters of funding for much-needed public services.

5. Vermont's Human Rights Obligation

Throughout our state, Vermonters are struggling to meet their needs and experiencing a denial of their basic rights to healthcare, housing, education, food and jobs. But Vermonters also have a vision for change, a vision of a more democratic and accountable government, of public policy focused on meeting needs and realizing rights.

Almost everyone that we surveyed, with only a handful of exceptions, found it unacceptable that some people in Vermont go hungry, cannot see a doctor or do not get paid a living wage.

“These are fundamental human rights.”

In many of the responses that we received, people's outrage about Vermont's human rights crisis was palpable.

“[It is] not acceptable that we're not all treated equally!”

Nearly all of the Vermonters that we spoke with also agreed that our state has a responsibility to end such injustice. Almost everyone said that Vermont has an obligation to meet its people's needs and protect our human rights, so that we can all have dignified lives with access to healthcare, education, housing, food and work.

“Basic needs are human rights, and if our government isn't covering that, then what are they doing?”

Participants shared many practical ideas about how Vermont could meet its obligations toward its people. One idea explicitly called for making all Vermont legislative bills compatible with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

There was overwhelming agreement among the Vermonters that we spoke with that the state needed to change its budget and revenue policies. The vast majority agreed that Vermont's budget should be based on people's needs.

“There is money in the state. [The problem] is just who decides where it will and should go.”

A similar majority also shared the view that sufficient revenue should be raised to meet those needs, particularly from those who are wealthier.

“Make people realize that paying taxes is not bad if they are going to [meeting the] public's needs like healthcare and education and not wars!”

Many respondents offered specific ideas on how to make the tax system more equitable. Suggestions included: increasing the top marginal tax rate, taxing the takeover of a local business by a big corporation, taxing the outsourcing of jobs and decreasing sales tax because it disproportionately hurts lower-income people.

“The larger injustice of the division between rich and poor is wrong; there needs to be better distribution of wealth – some have so much!”

With regard to public spending, a large majority of the Vermonters that we spoke with agreed that public resources should be distributed more fairly and equitably, so that everyone has their needs met.

“We have the resources for a living wage, healthcare, food. We need to reallocate resources.”

“Our dollars are not divided equally so everyone can have what they need.”

Many respondents presented ideas for allocating resources more equitably. These ideas ranged from making public benefits programs more universal, so that people are not excluded based on arbitrary income thresholds, to supporting homesteading through allocation of land.

Most of the people that we spoke with agreed that public dollars could go further by providing more services directly, rather than through middlemen (such as health insurance companies or

other private contractors). Suggestions included introducing a public bank in Vermont that could lend money to Vermonters directly, rather than dealing with the banks on Wall Street.

A large majority agreed that we need to create public jobs in education, childcare, healthcare, public transportation and environmental protection. While the availability of jobs was a key concern for the Vermonters that we spoke with, this consensus went hand in hand with demands for a livable wage. One respondent explained how even some wages in the public sector were too low, with teachers having to work a second job.

“We need a livable wage. [We] shouldn't have to struggle every day.”

After jobs, healthcare was the most important priority for respondents. The challenges of implementing Vermont's new universal healthcare law are numerous, but perhaps the greatest of these challenges centers on the financing plan for the new system, to be presented in early 2013. While the law states unmistakably that financing must be based on the principle of equity, the administration's plans are less clear. However, a large majority of respondents agreed that we must ensure that our new universal healthcare system will be financed equitably, so that people contribute according to their ability to pay and get the care that they need when they need it.

Among the Vermonters that we surveyed, nearly 1 in 5 were directly affected by the destruction caused by tropical storm Irene. Of those, 3 in 4 had already been struggling with the economic crisis, so they were hit twice as hard. This is not a coincidence. Environmental degradation and climate change, which are linked to increasingly severe weather patterns, tend to affect poor and disadvantaged communities more than wealthier people, who have more control over where they live. Moreover, environmental pollution – like climate change – is a direct consequence of an economy geared toward concentrating wealth rather than sharing prosperity.

In our survey, the overwhelming majority of Vermonters was worried about climate change. Almost 9 in 10 of the Vermonters that we spoke with expressed concern that the economic and environmental impacts of climate change would negatively affect their lives. Many offered specific ideas about how we could realize our right to a healthy environment. Suggestions included: more public transit, support for “walking” communities and bike paths, more funding for small-scale renewable energy projects, more support for local food production and distribution, better agricultural regulation to prevent pollution and promoting the use of food stamps for local, healthy food.

Vermonters also pointed out that our continuing economic and environmental crises exposed a crisis of democracy. Over 6 in 10 respondents thought that those most affected by the

economic and flood crises are not getting a say in how to solve the problems. While some felt they had a little bit of say, hardly anyone was confident that they had a full say. Vermonters clearly perceived a lack of real democracy. A majority agreed that the people should have input about what gets funded and where the money comes from. Specific suggestions for increasing participation and accountability ranged from better information on government decision-making to more direct democracy practices such as town hall meetings.

“The government exists for its people!”

Vermonters' understanding of how unmet needs are linked to unjust policies and unmet government responsibilities confirms that the failure of government to uphold its human rights obligation to its people can be characterized, fundamentally, as a failure of democracy.

toward a people's budget

The People's Budget campaign sets out to change fundamentally Vermont's approach to public policy. It is an effort to make our democracy more participatory and our government more accountable. The People's Budget is a framework for budget and tax policies that is based on the human rights that arise from people's needs. It puts people first, recognizing that the principal purpose of raising and spending money is to meet Vermonters' needs.

For many years, Vermont's budget has not been tied to goals or even to estimates of the cost of current services. Recently, the Challenges for Change framework sought to address this shortcoming by setting goals for outcomes and measuring progress. But because the overarching purpose was to cut spending – not to meet people's needs – Challenges for Change caused even more hardship in Vermonters' lives. In contrast, the People's Budget – in effect a People's Challenges for Change – provides a rational foundation for spending and revenue policies, along with a process for accountability and participation. It requires elected representatives to develop policies based on principles and specific goals, to engage Vermonters in developing those goals and to measure how well Vermont is doing in increasing people's well-being and realizing our human rights.

The People's Budget campaign proposes the following:

The budget of the state of Vermont must put human rights and the fundamental needs of our communities first. Our spending and revenue policies must meet every Vermonter's fundamental needs and human rights, including healthcare, housing, food, education, good jobs, social security and a healthy environment. These are universal public goods that our government must guarantee for all Vermonters. Vermont must seek to achieve equity among all Vermonters and eliminate poverty and disadvantage,

so that everyone can lead a life of dignity. Vermont can only meet human needs if it fosters an economy that protects the environment and achieves environmental justice. Vermont's budget and revenue policies must be developed in a transparent and accountable way, with participation from the people.

Therefore, the state of Vermont must resolve to develop, decide and implement its budget and tax policies based on an accountability framework guided by the principles of universality, equity, transparency, accountability and participation.

Universality

Vermont must realize economic and social rights by meeting everyone's fundamental needs, including healthcare, housing, food, education, good jobs and a healthy environment.

Guiding question: *Does the policy ensure that adequate resources are raised and spent to meet people's needs and progressively realize Vermonters' economic and social rights?*

Equity

Vermont must raise and distribute resources in a way that enables the equal realization of human rights.

Guiding question: *Does the policy increase equality by prioritizing the needs of those who are disadvantaged or vulnerable?*

Transparency

Vermont's government must be open with regard to information and decision-making processes. Vermonters must be able to know how public institutions and processes are managed and run.

Guiding question: *Is all budget and taxation information easily accessible and comprehensible?*

Accountability

Vermont must have mechanisms that enable the people to hold government and private actors accountable for meeting people's needs and realizing human rights.

Guiding question: *Is the policy subject to public oversight and challenge?*

Participation

Vermont's government must support the participation of the people in decisions about how their needs are met and their human rights realized.

Guiding question: *Does the budget and tax policy process include public participation?*

6. Conclusion

Vermont is facing a human rights crisis. In our conversations with Vermonters from all across the state, members of the Vermont Workers' Center were alarmed by the extent of unmet need within our communities. Yet we were also encouraged by our encounters with so many people who are willing to stand up for their social and economic rights and hold elected representatives accountable. Our survey results demonstrate that too many Vermonters are struggling to meet their needs and that cuts to public services have made the situation worse. Most survey participants found this fact unacceptable and affirmed that government has an obligation to meet people's needs and protect their human rights.

Vermonters are no longer fooled by the myth that there is not enough money available to fully fund necessary public services. Nor are Vermonters fooled by the myth that the wealthy are the "job creators" who could restore the economy if only their taxes (and regulation) were eliminated. For more than three decades policymakers have willingly reduced the tax contributions of the wealthy while increasing the burden – both in taxation and reduced public services – on the rest of us. Continuous growth in worker productivity has not been matched by increased wages. Nor has a rising GNP been matched by rising employment. Public policy has, for three decades, served private interests and corporate goals, and the result is government that has turned its back on its fundamental obligation to its people.

In demanding social and economic justice, Vermonters are seeking a different focus for government. Instead of taking care of the wealthy while pretending that benefits will "trickle down" to the rest of us, government must focus directly on the human needs of its people.

Instead of cutting public services to match the amount that the wealthy are willing to contribute, our elected officials must raise the revenue it will take to provide the services necessary to satisfy the needs of Vermonters.

We are not asking for “help”. We are not begging for charity. We are demanding democracy: government focused on its responsibility to its people instead of just the private interests of a few.

For many years we were told, in the halls of power, that fundamental reform of our healthcare system was not “politically possible.” We heard that upholding the human right to healthcare was not a priority of our elected representatives. In the course of three and a half years, the Vermont Workers’ Center’s Healthcare Is a Human Right campaign built a network of Vermonters committed to changing what is politically possible. We grew our power through grassroots organizing, and we changed what is politically possible in healthcare reform. Now, in the halls of power, we are no longer told that fulfilling the human right to healthcare is politically impossible.

Now we are told, instead, that a fundamental change in the way that government decides how to spend and raise money – a People’s Budget – is not politically possible. We hear that ordinary Vermonters have to “tighten their belts” while tax breaks for the wealthy and subsidies for large corporations continue. We recognize that the struggle for social and economic justice is a battle against the most powerful forces that human history has ever known. But we have a strategy.

On May 1, 2011, thousands of Vermonters gathered at the Statehouse to celebrate our imminent success in creating law that recognizes healthcare as a public good. At the same time, we began to demand our other public goods and claim our broader right to social and economic justice. Half a year later, with people around the world, we have come to call ourselves “the 99%”.

Our movement is grounded in the values of Vermonters. As Vermonters have for more than two centuries, we still believe in caring for our neighbors. We still abhor selfishness and greed. We still are annoyed by waste. It is these enduring shared values that have caused our state, time after time, to lead the country in the establishment and protection of human rights. The struggle for social and economic justice is a struggle that engages Vermonters’ shared values.

Through our work to create a healthcare system that treats healthcare as a human right, we have learned that, struggling together, we can begin to make our vision of social and economic justice become reality. So Vermont has become a catalyst for change nationwide. Yet we have much more to do. Now the time has come for Vermont to lead the nation in

VOICES OF VERMONT'S ECONOMIC CRISIS: THE CHALLENGE TO PUT PEOPLE FIRST
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re-establishing the fundamental obligation of government to meet human needs and fulfill human rights.

On January 3, 2012, at the start of the legislative session, we will deliver thousands of postcards expressing Vermonters' demand that our state must change its budget and revenue policy so that it puts people first. Throughout the legislative session, members of our organizing committees from every county in the state will be a constant, grassroots presence in the Statehouse, holding their representatives accountable to their human rights obligation to the people of Vermont.

At the same time, we will continue organizing, growing the power of the 99% in order to make the change we envision possible. Occupations in hundreds of cities around the country demonstrate that the people of the United States are ready to demand economic justice. Here in Vermont, we understand how to lead the nation. It is time for us, now, to lead the nation in re-establishing our fundamental right to social and economic justice.

Join us.