



The People's Address, Delivered on the Day of the Governor's Budget Address

JANUARY 24, 2013

The Vermont Workers' Center and our Put People First partners, including Green Mountain Self Advocates, delivered the People's Address on the future of our budget and healthcare systems. The People's Address was given ahead of the Governor's Budget Address and the Administration's presentation of a financing plan for universal healthcare on January 24, 2013.

Mr. Governor, Mr. President, Mr. Speaker, Mr. President Pro Tem, Members of the General Assembly, fellow people of Vermont:

Less than one year ago, the Vermont General Assembly, for the first time in history, established in law the purpose of Vermont's state budget. With the words "to address the needs of the people of Vermont in a way that advances human dignity and equity," the Legislature took an important step toward creating a people's budget — spending and revenue policy focused on satisfying the human needs and ensuring the human rights of every person in our communities.

In the past year, the call to put people first has brought together diverse groups from around Vermont into one movement for people and our planet. It is this unity that will continue to give our elected representatives the power and the courage to reshape public policy around the human rights principles that are the core of this movement's unity.

Nowhere is the attention of our government to the needs of the people of Vermont more starkly on display than in the decisions that our elected representatives make in spending and raising public money.

Nowhere can the values of our communities be better reflected than in these decisions about how our government will work.

And nowhere is there more work for us to do in busting myths, challenging prevailing assumptions and letting go of unproductive habits.

In calling for public policy that puts people first, the people of Vermont are rejecting the myth of scarcity. We understand that the revenue available to fund public programs is the result of public policy decisions. We understand that the call for austerity — so-called "belt tightening" — is little more than an effort by the wealthy to accumulate more at the expense of everyone else. And we understand that our government can serve us better, by focusing on people rather than on money.

Yet we have come to expect the opposite from the governor's annual budget address. Once again, this year, we expect to hear about limited revenue — that the most disadvantaged people will need to

tighten their belts, that public services will be further gutted and that growing need will be met with reduced funding for essential public programs. We expect to see attempts to pit one group of people against another, with proposals that shift resources from some poor people to other poor people. And, despite his looking to the most vulnerable to give up ever more, we expect the governor to be silent about wealth inequality and the shocking levels of poverty in Vermont. Instead, he will speak about budget gaps and speculate about job creators. We expect from the governor a budget proposal that will increase — rather than reduce — inequity in our state.

But it does not have to be that way. Our solution is a simple equation: Get what we need. Give what we can.

The principles of a people's budget are simple, but their satisfaction will require a change in the habits of government.

Rather than adjusting the budget to match a revenue estimate, our budget must start with an assessment of people's fundamental needs and then seek to fund the services required to meet those needs.

We must also ensure accountability by connecting our budgeting decisions to specific principles, goals derived from those principles and meaningful indicators of progress toward achieving our goals.

Finally, our communities must be able to participate fully in setting budget goals and priorities.

By means of a people's budget, we will ensure that, over time, every person in Vermont will be able to satisfy their fundamental human needs, and no one in our prosperous state will be forced to suffer the injustice of poverty.

A people's budget is a budget that puts people first. It is part of the people's agenda. In the coming year, we will build on the work done by the legislature last year and formalize and institutionalize structures and processes that will make possible the routine development of a true people's budget in Vermont.

We will improve transparency and public participation in the development of the state budget by passing legislation that requires the administration to prepare an accessible and easy-to-understand version of the budget and related documents. Our legislation will also begin the process of creating a formal, continuous process of meaningful public participation in the development of the state's budget.

And this legislation will improve accountability by requiring the governor's annual budget proposal to be clearly tied to the goals and initiatives identified in the public participation process.

While we work to turn our state budget process into a people's budget process, we will not wait to directly address the substantive issues that the people of Vermont face. Our people's agenda for 2013 also asks our legislature to focus directly on respecting, protecting and fulfilling the human rights that arise from fundamental human needs.

We must advance the rights of workers, of undocumented members of our communities, of people with disabilities and of everyone else. We must advance our right to a healthy environment and livable planet, because the well being of all is linked directly to that of our planet.

We must also continue to progress toward a healthcare system that is rooted in and satisfies the human rights principles of universality, equity, accountability, transparency and participation. With the passage of Act 48 in 2011, the legislature established a road map toward Vermont's universal healthcare system, Green Mountain Care. In the same way that a people's budget requires that we challenge old habits, assumptions and conventions, making Green Mountain Care the public good that Vermont law says it must be will require several paradigm shifts.

Specifically, we must recognize that such things as "benefit packages" and user fees (the latter couched in the insidiously nice-sounding term "cost sharing") are the result of that old system — the system that we are working to put behind us — the system in which insurance companies maximize their profits by restricting care, leaving people to suffer and die. Just as health insurance is not healthcare, the trappings of a health insurance system are not necessary components of a universal healthcare system.

To care for the health of every person in Vermont, we must ensure that every one of us receives all medically necessary care when we need it. We do not need a package of "benefits" that covers a list of conditions or body parts. We need comprehensive healthcare that meets all of our health needs.

Nor can we accept financial obstacles to receiving the care that we need when we need it. In our healthcare system, as in our people's budget, we should give what we can and get what we need.

Act 48 requires that the Governor this month propose a financing plan for Green Mountain Care. Like all elected representatives, our governor always emphasizes minimizing the total cost of the operation of government. And, as one expects, his focus in healthcare reform is on controlling system costs. While we all know that the elimination of insurance profiteers and other waste will save us money, this focus on costs creates the risk of distraction. We must avoid confusing means with ends. We must remember, as we propose, analyze, evaluate and debate the financing of Green Mountain Care, that the principal goal of our healthcare system is not to save money; it is to protect and care for the health of the people of Vermont.

Act 48 requires a healthcare system that is financed publicly and equitably, with sufficient funding to ensure universal access to comprehensive and appropriate care. As the Healthcare Is a Human Right campaign has demonstrated in its detailed healthcare system financing proposal, the most equitable way to finance a healthcare system is through progressive taxation, which ensures that financial contributions are based on ability to pay rather than on the use of needed care or the purchase of a particular insurance product.

In our healthcare system, as in our people's budget, we should get what we need and give what we can.

Though our transition from a healthcare system financed largely through private insurance to a healthcare system that is a public good is still several years away, now is the time to set the parameters for implementing equitable financing through progressive taxation and plan for the elimination of insurance premiums, deductibles, co-payments and co-insurance.

In this legislative session, we must move forward on healthcare reform in five specific ways.

We must ensure that the transition to Green Mountain Care, our universal health care system, is based on Act 48's human rights principles of universality, equity, accountability, transparency and participation.

We must ensure that even during the federally-mandated exchange transition phase, our healthcare system expands the public provision of healthcare services to increase access to care, and does not take a step backward by reducing access to care through eliminating public programs.

We must take action on an equitable financing plan for Green Mountain Care.

We must ensure that all health needs of the people of Vermont are included in the design of our universal system, and that healthcare provision is based upon a person's individual health needs, not upon a general set of "covered benefits."

We must ensure that our healthcare system is universal, by including all Vermont residents, regardless of their immigration status.

By means of the People's Budget campaign and the Healthcare Is a Human Right campaign — among other initiatives — the Put People First movement has challenged our elected representatives to reframe public policy in terms of the human rights that arise from fundamental human needs. We have begun to change public policy and public process by building the political power necessary to make change possible.

In the coming year, our focus on equity in our state budget and our healthcare system will challenge our elected representatives to reconsider old assumptions, conventions and habits. And we will be here to help them to engage in this challenge.

In the call to put people first, the people of Vermont are seeking true democracy. With boldness and courage, we will move closer to this goal, this year.

Now, let's get to work making government that puts people first.

Thank you.

