

Four hands of different skin tones (light, medium, and dark) are positioned to form a circle, with fingers pointing towards the center. The background is a soft, light gradient.

Truth and Healing

In Search of a Common Memory

Vermont Truth and Reconciliation Commission (VTRC)
Strategic Plan 2022 - 2027



Dear Community,

We invite you on this journey with the Vermont Truth & Reconciliation Commission (VTRC) to create a new road map for the future of Vermont. This journey must be fueled with intention and care. This Strategic Plan is more than a document; It is a vision for realizing a future of new possibilities. This Commission has been tasked to look at how discrimination has been built into Vermont's laws and policies, both past and present, and has impacted the most vulnerable communities in Vermont. The Commission has been mandated to document institutional, structural, and systemic discrimination in Vermont and identify potential actions that can be taken by the state to repair the damage caused by this harm. The Commission's recommendations will center healing and hopefully prevent the recurrence of such discrimination in the future.¹

Tackling this work with intentionality has weighed upon our hearts and minds. The majority of truth and reconciliation processes that have been established worldwide were scaled to a specific group of people, a time-period, and atrocity. Vermont is setting a historical precedent by being broader in scope, which presents opportunities and challenges. Our approach is grounded with purpose and meaning in every decision. It has to be. We keep those who have come before us, ourselves, and our future generations in mind. We thought about the meanings of truth and of reconciliation. We wanted to make sure truths were honored for those who have not been uplifted in the past. Even the word reconciliation was debated. Was there ever a good relationship between the state of Vermont and the ACT 128 communities? Reconciliation involves restoring harmony between parties and conciliation focuses on resolving conflicts and bringing people together. Ultimately, we will provide a report to the state, and we hope that government officials will decide to implement their own accountability process.

The process for creating the framework of this strategy began with an exploration of identity as outlined in the mandate. Human identity and relationships intersect with many types of communities, experiences, and ancestors. Identities and relationships change over time, and the human experience has many beautiful iterations. Separating the mandate by identities was too limiting, because identities are not experienced in isolation.

Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw, the person who coined the term "intersectionality" reminds us, "If we aren't intersectional, some of us, the most vulnerable, are going to fall through the cracks."² The impact of intersectionality cannot be understated. Eli Clare, Vermont activist, writer, educator, and speaker, said, "How do we make the space to talk honestly and wrenchingly about all the multi-layered systems of injustice that target some of us and privilege others for who we are? The layers are so tangled: gender folds into disability, disability wraps around class, class strains against race, race snarls into sexuality, sexuality hangs onto gender, all of it finally piling into our bodies...How do we dig down to find, not uncrackable, unmovable rhetoric, but the concrete daily material, emotional, and spiritual realities of privilege and oppression on this planet rife with injustice..."³

As identity was too narrow, we focused attention on institutions and systems. For example, we considered framing the work through healthcare, education, criminal justice, and housing. There are many examples of oppressive laws and policies that have both historically and presently affected the communities of this mandate. We realized that focus, too, was flawed—many disparities intersect with multiple systems. As Audre Lorde, intersectional feminist, poet, and civil rights activist, explained, "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives."⁴

Once again, we revised our focus. Ultimately, we arrived at the beginning of this mandate, which arose from an apology for the state's participation in the eugenics movement. Vermont's acknowledgment and apology for its role in this appalling chapter of its history was an important step forward. Yet, the apology felt insufficient in addressing the profound and enduring harm inflicted on individuals and families. Thus, the idea of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission was born out of recognition that deeper, more meaningful action is needed. With this in mind, this Commission would like you to co-create the blueprint for a better Vermont by sharing your truths and your calls to action. Thank you for being part of our journey to realize this Strategic Plan.

In unity and collaboration,



Mia Shultz

Commissioner Mia Shultz



Melody Mackin

Commissioner Melody Mackin

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Background Analysis

When Minneapolis police officer, Derek Chauvin, murdered George Floyd in 2020, it began a long-overdue reckoning with the legacy and persistence of racism in the United States. This period involved the Vermont Department of Health declaring racism as a public health emergency and aimed to draw attention to massive racial disparities in health outcomes.⁵ Multiple organizations in the U.S., both private and public, issued statements and declarations that promised they would work tirelessly to address systemic racism in the U.S. by paying close attention to hiring and employment practices. A massive governmental investment in grants and programs to support diversity, equity, and inclusion, combined with massive federal infusions of funding that sought to address health disparities related to COVID-19 provided a historical opportunity to reorient American society so that the country could collectively work to address systemic inequality, oppression, and discrimination. This political environment provided space for the state of Vermont to consider its own history and to commit to holistic and sustained actions that could address these issues.

In 2022 the Vermont Legislature publicly apologized for the Legislature’s support of the eugenics movement in Vermont.⁶ This movement, which was able to take hold in an environment of prejudice and discrimination, culminated in doctors sterilizing Vermonters, placing hundreds of children and adults in institutions plagued by abuses, and a broad campaign that taught eugenics as a scientific fact in schools, universities, and adult education groups.⁷ The state removed children from their homes, drove people from many targeted communities into hiding, traumatized countless people in need, and ended familial lines.

The main goal of the eugenics movement in Vermont was to promote procreation and success among white, cisgender, heterosexual, Protestant, wealthy, Anglo-Vermonters and segregate and stop the procreation of all others who were considered inferior.

This was done under the assumption that the former population was biologically superior and that latter populations were biologically inferior and marked by deficiency, degeneracy, and delinquency. Eugenics has its roots in racial pseudoscience from anthropology and biology that emerged in the late 1800s. This pseudoscience reduced cultural belonging and identity to biology and quantified that belonging through false ideas about “blood,” producing contemporary ideas that linger today, such as blood quantum.⁸

Eugenics advocates in Vermont and around the world used terms like “feeble-minded” and “defective” to justify institutionalization, segregation, and sterilization of people they saw as undesirable.⁹ Eugenicians thought of these labels as scientific and medical. But in reality, they applied these terms so inconsistently and broadly that any person who did not fit their idea of what a “true” Vermonter was, could be labeled as “defective.” People labeled as such were separated from their family, friends, and community, and then sent to state institutions rife with abuses.

The Vermont eugenics movement’s effects are still felt today in disparities in health outcomes, rates of incarceration and institutionalization, quality of life, housing access, and educational opportunities, among many other areas. The language of eugenics is still present in popular- media and healthcare discourses. There is no neat “end” to eugenics in Vermont or anywhere else in the world. Likewise, there is no neat “beginning” to eugenics.

Apologies, such as the one that the legislature issued, are only substantive when followed by actions. In this spirit, the state legislature created the VTRC. The VTRC is designed to be an entity that is independent and autonomous from state government. The legislature has charged the VTRC with a substantial mission – to dismantle systemic discrimination and oppression resulting from state laws and policies. This charge stretches far beyond the eugenics movement and will reveal the root causes of the injustices that it is tasked with addressing.

The current disparities in incarceration, health outcomes, education, institutionalization, housing access, and the right to exist safely in society did not emerge in a vacuum, just as eugenics did not emerge in a vacuum. The 1793 Constitution of the State of Vermont, which followed the 1777 Constitution of the Vermont Republic, is a product of its time. Much of the legislative, philosophical, and cultural framework that informed the Constitution came from Elizabethan England and neighboring New England states that were likewise informed by Elizabethan law and norms.¹⁰

The Elizabethan Era involved substantial colonization that displaced, murdered, and erased the existence of uncountable Indigenous peoples in the Americas. This century marked the beginning of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, displacing, murdering, and erasing the identities and cultures of millions of people from Sub-Saharan Africa. It entailed widespread persecution of Catholics in England.¹¹ Jews could not legally live in England during this time.¹² Elizabethan policies treated impoverished and disabled people punitively and provided few rights for average citizens.¹³ Having such a system as the basis of law and rights raises serious questions about how this framework can be an adequate means of securing and perpetuating the rights of people living today.

When people speak of Vermont today, they may emphasize the state's progressive nature both in the present and past, pointing to, for instance, the fact that Vermont was the earliest state to adopt anti-slavery policies. However, this law has been severely mischaracterized. Enslavement was still legal for men and boys under the age of 21 and women and girls under the age of 18.¹⁴ The law did not provide enforcement mechanisms to penalize people living in Vermont who enslaved human beings; treating Africans and their descendants as property and not as people who deserved rights or legal protections.

Likewise, the Constitution of the State of Vermont only provided men with the right to vote, denying others the right to Legislative representation and a democratic voice. It was based upon Europeans' and their descendants' assumed-right to land in a continent they had never visited, and it involved a refusal to acknowledge the rights of Indigenous peoples who have called Vermont home since time immemorial. It treated impoverished and disabled people severely by seriously limiting their rights and segregating them from the rest of society.¹⁵ It did not protect the rights of all those living in Vermont.

This is the philosophical, moral, and legislative environment, from which the eugenics movement emerged. This is the environment that has enabled contemporary prejudices, such as transphobia, racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism, among countless other forms of discrimination and hatred. This is what the VTRC is tasked with dismantling.

How can there be reconciliation if there has never been conciliation, much less acknowledgment, of many of these injustices? One of the most chilling aspects of the eugenics movement and the drafting of the Constitution of the State of Vermont is that the people behind them imagined themselves as champions of rights and wrote of their efforts as improving society.

This engenders morally essential questions that faces humanity—what hardship and cruelty do we perpetuate, despite our best intentions? What violence has society normalized to the point that we do not view it as violence? Whose voices do we ignore and disregard, no matter how anguished they become?

The VTRC will never be able to entirely dismantle all systems of oppression and discrimination, and certainly it will not be able to do so in a prescribed and limited amount of time. The VTRC can only hope to begin a statewide dialogue that deeply reckons with the state's history, seriously considers the future that we are leaving for our descendants, and begins a deeply needed process of healing. The VTRC cannot enforce its recommendations and cannot singlehandedly implement the changes in education, culture, and consciousness that can rectify these injustices and prevent them from reoccurring.

The VTRC's work will ultimately only have meaning if the Legislators and the general public give our work meaning. A true process of truth and reconciliation involves a society that is animated by a desire to know our neighbors and to ensure that all who live here can live a dignified life, filled with opportunity and acceptance.

Since its creation, the VTRC has engaged extensively with the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) to shape and focus its mission, vision, and goals. The ICTJ has been instrumental in the creation of the VTRC and Act 128, including providing the Legislature with essential input on how to create and operationalize truth and reconciliation commissions. Ongoing conversations with multiple individuals and organizations across Vermont have helped the VTRC gain a better understanding of what the public expects and how to organize efforts.

Mission

The VTRC wrote a mission to crystallize its purpose. From the moment the Commissioners were appointed, four questions became guiding tenets of the VTRC:

- Who are we?**
- What do we want?**
- Who do we serve?**
- What are we willing to sacrifice?**

While reflecting on these imperative questions, the VTRC received guidance from Dr. Roz Whitaker-Heck, who provided a framework called murmuration— “remarkable ability to maintain cohesion as a group in highly uncertain environments and with limited, noisy information.”³ VTRC has been applying murmuration as a mindset. The Commission researched the missions of truth & reconciliation commissions all over the world. The VTRC developed a first version and brought it to the public.

The following is the first version:

The Vermont Truth and Reconciliation Commission exists in a pursuit of community-centered justice and holistic healing centered on impacted intergenerational Act 128 communities. We seek collective liberation from institutional, systemic, violence and racism by uplifting community voices through storytelling, researching and community relationships.

After a month of input from the public both in our public meeting space and via email, the final version of the mission statement was created:

We exist in pursuit of community-centered justice and holistic healing that prioritize impacted Act 128 communities, which include:

- Individuals who identify as Native American or Indigenous;
- Individuals with physical, psychiatric, or mental conditions or disability, and the families of individuals with the physical, psychiatric or mental health condition or disability;
- Black individuals and other individuals of color;
- Individuals with French Canadian, French- Indian or other mixed ethnic or racial heritage;
- Other populations and communities at the discretion of the Commissioners

We seek collective liberation from violence and discrimination systemically perpetrated by the state of Vermont. We do this by uplifting community voices through storytelling, researching, and community relationships, and make legislative recommendations.

Vision

Truth and reconciliation are ultimately an exercise of the heart, in which the voices of the unheard are uplifted through truth-telling. This is not meant to be performative; it is meant to be healing and transformative for all parties. The VTRC fits within a global movement that includes commissions from South Africa, Germany, Liberia, Solomon Islands, to South Korea, and yet, its mandate allows for a one-of-a-kind adaptation. Each place features different worldviews and people that may even have different definitions of truth and reconciliation. The VTRC understands that reconciliation is an individual process and that a blanket apology will not be sufficient.

The VTRC would like to create space for truth-telling and for each individual to be in control of what an apology looks like for them.



The Olive Branch

The logo is part of the intentional design of the VTRC's work. Created by Thea Heck, it features an olive branch in gold with ten leaves facing downward and oppositely arranged. The leaves remain as pairs. The VTRC is bolded in purple. While researching the olive branch, the VTRC learned that the olive branch is prominently featured in many cultures, especially from the Mediterranean region, Asia, and Africa where it originates. Among some of these cultures, the olive branch symbolizes wisdom, hope, fertility, power, health, balance, the source of light, and it is a sacred symbol in some religious traditions.

Colonists to Turtle Island, later named the Americas, brought the olive tree with them and all of the cultural symbolism associated with it. The practice of settler colonialism, including the genocide of Native peoples, the creation of the institution of slavery, and the social constructions of race, and ability were only possible through adherence to the Doctrine of Discovery. The Doctrine of Discovery erased the sacred symbols related to the olive branch and replaced them with colonization and dehumanization of those they encountered and forced into servitude.¹⁶ The VTRC rejects the Doctrine of Discovery and recognizes the humanity of all human beings, past and present, especially those who have never been acknowledged as human. The VTRC reclaims the olive tree's original symbolism.



Conventionally, the expression to “extend the olive branch” indicates that a gesture of reconciliation or peace has been offered. Once each person has reclaimed their own humanity, they can truly recognize and acknowledge the humanity of others. Through the reclamation of ourselves as human beings and the understanding of our place within creation and the community of human and non-human relatives, we can finally obliterate the systems of oppression that keep us down. Collective liberation is possible if we can think outside of the systems that have been handed to us. As Aboriginal rights activists in Queensland, Australia say, “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”¹⁷

The Vermont Constitution begins by stating that “all persons are born equally free and independent, and have certain natural, inherent, and unalienable rights.”¹⁸ Those rights include: “enjoying and defending life and liberty, acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing happiness and safety.” Have these provisions been afforded in their entirety to all within the borders of Vermont or only to a very narrow group of people since the creation of Vermont? There is a perception and bias of who is a real Vermonter. As the olive branch became a symbol of colonization, the VTRC would like to extend it back. This is an invitation for society to hold itself accountable and uphold its own values for ALL people that live within this part of Mother Earth. Vermont has an opportunity to uplift the spirit of the olive branch: wisdom, hope, health, and balance.

Who is a “Vermonter?”

During the writing of this plan, one of the commissioners took a break and visited the local store. It was a bit of a chilly morning at the beginning of spring and the attendant commented on the weather, per the usual custom. They laughed and said,

“I’m not sure of your background but I’m used to this. I’m a real Vermonter and go back generations.”

This is a very common sentiment shared throughout Vermont,

“Who is a real Vermonter?”

It has seeped into the cultural fabric of this place, so much so that a morning chat about the weather inevitably led to the question. The impact of how it is framed is by nature exclusionary. The Native Vermont stickers seen around the state do not denote one as being either Mohican or Abenaki, rather they refer to this idea of the old Vermont stock. Nancy Gallagher studied the Eugenics Survey of Vermont and wrote of this practice, “The Eugenics Survey of Vermont and the Vermont Commission on Country Life emerged as a focal point for confronting the racism, xenophobia, and religious intolerance beneath the mythical portrayals of Vermonters as a ‘hardy race’ descended from the old New England Protestant stocks.”¹⁹

In shaping the common memory of this place, it is essential to place Vermont in context. The origin story of this land that is now called Vermont begins billions of years ago and includes continental shifts, non-human relatives of many varieties that have come and gone, and the human inhabitants that came to call this land home. The original peoples of this place incorporate the land itself as a part of their own creation story and understand that they are the land, and the land is them. Vermont is situated within the homeland of the Abenaki and Mohican people. The political, social, and cultural history of this place began long before Vermont's founding, which is but one very small part of its history.



Who is a “real” Vermonter then? The cultural norm refers to a very select group of people. The old New England Protestant stock that consumed much of the Mohican and Alnobak, commonly known as Western Abenaki, homeland were the only people seen as the actual community of this place. Furthermore, the constitutional provision to outlaw slavery was limited and did not erase that system of dehumanization for people under a certain age nor deter those who continued to participate or benefit economically. Since the formation of Vermont, there has always been an “other”.

The symptoms of this sentiment can be seen in the history of enslavement, the history of discrimination against the disability community, the history of institutions, eugenics laws, and presently in the mentality that allows discrimination to proliferate. Complicity and ignorance allow all of those systems to thrive. The language in the original eugenics survey “othered” people by using derogatory language, such as “the degenerate family”. It is imperative to consider the ways in which ableism was used to create the language of degeneracy as well as the systems to support that movement. According to the Burlington Free Press in their piece on the proposed eugenics apology, “In a farewell address to the Vermont Legislature in 1912, Gov. John Mead called for a “eugenic solution” to the problem of “our degenerates,” marking a defining moment for the eugenics movement in Vermont. Noted in a journal article from the Vermont Historical Society, “it was the first time a state official had publicly proposed eugenics as an answer to a growing number of perceived social crises.”²⁰ The question, “Who is a real Vermonter?”, has roots that precede eugenics, but the practice of “othering” also gave rise to it.

It is critical to reshape the collective memory and perception of who qualifies as a “Vermonters” and who is entitled to the rights guaranteed by the Constitution and promised by the state. The gap between the lived experience of the old Protestant stock is often immensely different from the lived experiences of everyone else in Vermont. The prevailing narrative asserts a hierarchical understanding of who deserves these rights, perpetuating exclusion and marginalization. As long as the conception of who belongs to Vermont remains narrow and limited, violence will persist against particular groups deemed non-Vermonters.

The work of the VTRC seeks to challenge and broaden this limited perspective so that everyone that makes a home here can be included in the community.

The VTRC contends that every person defines for themselves whether they are a Vermonter, and no person or entity shall determine that for them.

Robin Kimmerer wrote in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, **“...All flourishing is mutual.”²¹**

Impacted Communities

During the conceptualization process of the VTRC, Representative Tom Stevens stated,

“We’re trying to build something that represents the beginning of a longer conversation between those of us who are part of the systems and the people that we’re needing to listen to during this process.”²²

His statement is in direct alignment with those considered Vermonters and those who have been impacted by discrimination. During the advocacy of creating a truth and reconciliation commission he said, “In order for us to reckon as an institution, as a system that did the oppression, we need to hear from people, and they need to feel like they can tell their stories.”²³ As a result of this vision, the VTRC is tasked with scrutinizing the discrimination perpetuated by the state through its laws and policies. Lawmakers were careful to choose specific identities with the historical and generational memory of discrimination and marginalization.

In the first year of the Commission, emblematic case meetings were held where discrimination was defined as: **“The treatment or consideration of people differently based on their group, class, or category, rather than on individual merit.”** Within the context of truth and reconciliation, the term “discrimination” alone does not capture the specific damages experienced by the various groups named in the mandate.

To address this, the VTRC began to explore what has been lost historically, presently and over generations of discrimination. By reviewing the emblematic cases, holding commissioner discussions with the groups listed in the mandate, and pursuing targeted research, the Commission was able to identify the tangible and intangible losses these communities have endured.





Spiritual and Cultural Identity

Language and Communication, Cultural and Traditional Heritage, Religion and Spiritual Practices, Identity and Self-worth, Artistic and Creative Expression, Recognition and Honor, Joy and Quality of Life



Community and Relationships

Social Connections and Belonging, Childhood and Family, Visibility and Representation, Political and Legal Representation, Credibility and Trust



Health and Well-being

Health and Mental Health, Personal Safety and Freedom, Life, Reproductive Autonomy, Dignity and Respect



Land and Resources

Land and Property, Economic Opportunities and Wealth, Access to Services and Technology, Public Accommodations



Mobility and Access

Educational Opportunities, Employment and Career, Transportation and Mobility

The impacted communities experienced damage and harm in desperate ways. Due to the framework of dominant culture, these communities have often been pitted against each other and even within each group.

**Lateral violence is a direct result of intentional division.
The sharing of stories may provide an opportunity for individuals and groups to find commonality through related and shared experiences.**

Apologies

The VTRC was created out of an apology by the state of Vermont for its legalization of eugenics, also known as forced sterilization of human beings.

The apology was not enough.²⁴

Many governments around the world have used apologies as a pathway toward redemption. That said, there are problems with apologies. For example, if people have lost access to their own language and culture, how will that ever be recovered again? Apologies will never be enough. Though healing can come from a true sincere apology, it is not possible without action. A sincere apology must shift blame from the victim to the perpetrator. Originally, the VTRC framed the question,

“What does Vermont owe you an apology for?” Consistent feedback from impacted community members as well as documentation from other reconciliation processes was clear; apologies are not effective and sometimes feel insincere to the impacted community who often experience generations of violence that may persist into the present.

The VTRC has a responsibility to find ways to prevent apologies from being actionless.

Each generation, no matter where they come from — whether they are born into poverty or with wealth, whether they are of European or African descent or Native to this place — make concerted efforts to break cycles of trauma. Most people do not want their children, grandchildren, nieces, or nephews to suffer or endure pain or trauma. People who have endured generations of violence, theft, and erasure do pass trauma down from generation to generation because the system continually perpetuates it through laws and policies. What is enough to break cycles of oppression and trauma? The VTRC will ask what justice and healing might look like to each person so that these calls to action can help form the final report to the state of Vermont. The VTRC would like to call in impacted communities to tell their truths, reveal what has been lost in their lives and in their ancestors’ lives, and inform a pathway toward a future without intentional barriers or loss.

Truth-Telling for the Future

The VTRC is here to listen.

Per the VTRC mission, one of the main goals of the Commission is to uplift the truths of impacted communities. In order to make reconciliation a reality and more than just a ten-thousand-foot view of what CAN be, Vermonters must pay attention and do so with curiosity. They must listen to the truths of the people and hold them sacred without judgment and they must suspend disbelief. The truths of the unheard and oppressed will be unsettling, uncomfortable, powerful, numerous, and will generate new understanding. They will be anecdotes of what it means to be human. We will all grow, if we are willing to listen.

Some of the themes that emerged from the public during the VTRC’s Emblematic Case meetings include dehumanization of people, abuse of power, lack of accountability, inadequate inclusive policies, bias, and harsh punishment. Only those who have survived and the descendants of impacted people can tell us where to begin. It is an entitlement to expect people to tell their truths and relive what could be some of the worst experiences of their lives or the lives of their ancestors without offering something in return. Their truths will be a pathway toward the acknowledgment of harm and to create a blueprint for action.

Though the VTRC is uplifting the voices of Act 128 communities, both those who are the perpetrators of violence and those who are impacted by violence need to heal. Therefore, the VTRC will invite the systems and structures that caused harm to acknowledge the violence done and begin their own process of reconciliation. Desmond Tutu helps us reflect on this by stating,

“True reconciliation is never cheap, for it is based on forgiveness which is costly. Forgiveness in turn depends on repentance, which has to be based on an acknowledgment of what was done wrong, and therefore on disclosure of the truth. You cannot forgive what you do not know.”²⁵

Research

The stalk of the olive branch serves as a poignant symbol, reflecting the collective memory that the VTRC aims to cultivate through this process. As Georges Erasmus, a Dene leader, eloquently stated in the context of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, **“Where common memory is lacking, where people do not share in the same past, there can be no real community. Where community is to be formed, common memory must be created”²⁶**

In Vermont, community’s memories are varied and complex. Some recall narratives of Progressivism, liberalism, and the state’s idyllic landscapes, intertwined with tales of Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys, alongside milestones, like being the first U.S. state to abolish slavery, to introduce civil unions on July 1, 2000, and to introduce same-sex marriage by enacting a statute without being required to do so by a court decision. Conversely, others bear memories of stolen land, indentured servitude, continued slavery, forced sterilization, hate crimes, the haunting legacies of the Ku Klux Klan and sundown towns. Through rigorous historic and ethnographic research and the integration of truths by impacted communities, both past and present, the VTRC aims to establish a shared memory that acknowledges the full spectrum of Vermont’s history.

The VTRC will ask how the present view of history came to be and whose perspectives have been excluded. The Commission will work closely with several families that are linked by oppressive and discriminatory systems throughout the history of Vermont. By collaboratively working with these families, the VTRC will work to build a shared memory that includes the voices of the people that have been dismissed and dehumanized. This will allow Vermont to build a consciousness that is more inclusive, and by extension, more truthful. Drawing inspiration from decolonial research methods, the VTRC will work intentionally, respectfully, and cooperatively to help restore and uplift the dignity of families. The VTRC recognizes the families as research partners, not research subjects. They are the experts on their lives and have deeply held knowledge of the harm that the state has inflicted on them. The families will provide the VTRC with suggestions about the way the state could atone for its actions and the type of legislative remedies that can prevent the violence.

Themes that emerge from statements collected from the impacted communities outlined in Act 128 will be integrated into the final report. By integrating first-hand accounts, the VTRC aims to reveal the enduring patterns that connect historical injustices to contemporary realities. Finally, this research will highlight opportunities for familial healing, root cause analysis, and legislative reform that will ensure these acts of violence do not continue in the present or happen again in the future.

Legal

Building upon the progress made through historical, legal frameworks, and social movements, the VTRC recognizes the ongoing gaps in the pursuit to abolish discrimination in institutions and systems. The VTRC acknowledges the efforts made by the U.S. and Vermont to correct legal frameworks and to address discrimination through measures, such as disability and civil rights legislation as well as anti-discrimination laws. The VTRC also recognizes the creation of agencies, boards, and commissions that have been created to address the gaps in the federal laws. Yet, the work remains because the injury continues.

The VTRC must learn about and understand the laws and policies in the present and the past that inflict/inflicted harm to so many. The Commission will share what it has learned with the Vermont Legislators and with Vermont citizens so that we address the impacts together. Some of the impacts include stolen generational wealth, identities hidden in order to survive, parents who faced discrimination and children who were robbed of their innocence and thrust into institutions, poor farms, or adoption without community, belonging, and care. These are the types of harms that do not go away in a generation or even three.

As the VTRC address the legal institutions, structures and systems, it asks the following questions:

- How can the laws, policies, and people acting on behalf of the state of Vermont help address these injustices, acknowledge the harm, and support communities moving forward?
- What laws, policies or other guidance could stop current discrimination or prevent new iterations of discrimination by the state?
- What laws and policies can bring closure and healing to families today, by providing access to the information about their ancestors? This information includes how they died, the forms of suffering they endured, and where they were buried?

The legal system was created with the idea that individuals have rights to life, liberty, pursuit of happiness and safety. The VTRC is in pursuit of ensuring that all people are guaranteed these rights. To accomplish this, the voices of the impacted should not only be heard but their experiences uplifted to shape a new way of creating and evaluating laws. Justice Thurgood Marshall saw that it is not enough to have the right words in a constitution, laws or caselaw. Society needs to make sure that justice can emerge and shine in tandem with the realities of society.

In Marshall’s own words:

“We cannot play ostrich. Democracy just cannot flourish amid fear. Liberty cannot bloom amid hate. Justice cannot take root amid rage. America must get to work. In the chill climate in which we live, we must go against the prevailing wind. We must dissent from the indifference. We must dissent from apathy. We must dissent from fear, hatred and mistrust. We must dissent from a nation that has buried its head in the sand, waiting in vain for the needs of its poor, its elderly, and its sick to disappear and just blow away. We must dissent from a government that has left its young without jobs, education or hope. We must dissent from the poverty of vision and the absence of moral leadership.

...We must dissent because America can do better, because America has no choice but to do better.”²⁷

Timeline



Phase I Pre Establishment

During the Pre-Establishment Phase 1 of the VTRC, the Commission was formed. A bill was introduced into the legislation in January 2021.²⁸ The groundwork began during the legislative sessions in 2022 at the Vermont State House where the H.96 Truth and Reconciliation Commission Development Task Force convened to lay the groundwork for this transformative endeavor. The legislative calendar was punctuated by the efforts of representatives like Kevin Christie, Harold “Hal” Colston, Thomas Stevens, and a host of additional sponsors who championed the cause. On May 24, 2022, Governor Phil Scott signed the bill, and it became Act 128.

In November 2022, the VTRC Commissioner Selection Panel began the process of seeking candidates for commissioners pursuant to § 904 and § 905. The panel members include the following individuals: Vanessa Santos Eugenio, Co-Chair, Karen Tronsgard-Scott, Co-Chair, Nina Ridhibinyo, Judith Chalmer, N. Bruce Duthu, Etan Nasreddin-Longo, Jennifer Morton-Dow. In April 2023, three commissioners were chosen and introduced to the public. The chosen commissioners were: Melody Mackin, M.A.; Mia Schultz; and Patrick Standen, M.A.



Phase II Building and Planning

The Commissioners began their work on March 31, 2023, with a public introduction. The beginning of the building and planning phase of the newly-established commission included commissioner onboarding. The Commissioners completed state employee orientation, ordered office equipment, and set up the personnel system.

Staff recruitment and hiring were a significant undertaking and involved identification of roles and responsibilities for potential staff as outlined in Act 128—an executive director, lead researcher, administrative assistant, and legal counsel. Commissioners created job descriptions and worked closely with Human Resources to post job opportunities. Commissioners set up and conducted interviews and hired Faith Yacubian (executive director), Ann Miller (administrative assistant), Adam Kersch (lead researcher), and Michele Olvera (legal counsel).

A significant amount of time from the beginning of the building and planning phase went into research for the operational foundation. This included the context of the truth and reconciliation movement internationally and nationally so that the VTRC could create a local adaptation tailored to Vermont. Through the guidance of the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), the Commissioners set up consultations with truth and reconciliation officers from across the world to build a foundation for the Commission’s process. The Commissioners created working agreements; established relationships with various agencies and stakeholders across the state; set-up a remote office structure; created the website; set up administrative policies; created a public meeting structure; and learned how to work within the Vermont State System.

Outreach is a significant part of the Commissioners’ duties. During the building and planning phase, the Commissioners conceptualized and created an Outreach Plan. The Commissioners began building relationships within communities; met with organizations virtually and in person; attended public events; created events to engage the public; and engaged in in-person outreach. Part of outreach, and the mandate itself, includes fundraising for the additional money required to complete VTRC’s work. During the building and planning phase, a strategy for fundraising was developed to ensure that the work is fully funded and not completed with a scarcity lens. Part of this strategy is to appeal to the institutions and organizations that have benefited from, and/or contributed to discrimination.

The VTRC refers to these organizations as “Reconciliation Partners”. Though they are not legally compelled to be part of this process, they could be viewed as having a responsibility to be part of this process.

The strategic plan includes the mission, vision, and action plans. Within the action plan are tasks that incorporate methodology, truth-telling tools, messaging and communications, fundraising, rules, and protocols. While conceptualizing the strategic plan, the VTRC orchestrated an emblematic case process. *Protocols and strategies will be posted to the VTRC website <https://vtrc.vermont.gov/> following their approval at a public meeting.

Phase III Implementation Phase

This phase is about listening and features a comprehensive and inclusive approach to gathering statements from impacted community members listed in Act 128. This plan recognizes the diverse needs and circumstances of the participants by offering multiple ways to engage. Through in-person, public truth-telling sessions, both virtual and in-person, as well as individual and group sessions, this process accommodates various accessibility needs and ensures that those who wish to be confidential are included. Furthermore, the VTRC offers broad opportunities to share stories, including verbal statements, videos, and written and artistic expression. Restorative practices and trauma-informed services are paramount to the success of these sessions and are infused to support victims throughout the process.

Representatives of institutions and contributing systems that have perpetuated and benefited from discrimination are invited to participate in the truth-telling process. These sessions are separate from the impacted communities. This open-dialogue and engagement aims to facilitate meaningful reflection, cultural humility, and empathy to foster the understanding that discrimination impacts all Vermonters. The initial 11-member committee established during the building and planning phase, guides the committee structure used during implementation. The committee members' insights and expertise ensure that the approach is adaptive, accessible, and responsive to community needs.

Historical, ethnographic, and legal research continues throughout implementation are informed by the truth-telling sessions.

*Protocols and strategies can be found on the VTRC website <https://vtrc.vermont.gov/>



Methods for Taking Truth Telling Statements

There will be multiple paths for truth tellers to give statements including public, individual, private, confidential and group listening sessions.

Care and healing will be at the heart of every stage of the truth-telling process, ensuring that individuals feel supported and valued at every step. Before the testimony, VTRC will offer a safe and compassionate environment, preparing each person with the emotional and psychological care they may need. During the telling of their truths, there will be a respectful, attentive atmosphere that encourages openness while safeguarding their well-being. After the testimony, healing will continue to be a priority, with ongoing resources and support available to help individuals process their experiences and find peace. Every aspect of this journey will be centered around compassion, ensuring that each person feels seen, heard, and respected throughout.

Public-In Person Truth Telling Events

Public sessions will be held at various locations across the state, with five scheduled in total. Each session will be recorded, and witnesses will be invited to attend in person. While these sessions will be available in a hybrid format for virtual viewing, no statements will be accepted from participants joining remotely.

Virtual Truth Telling Sessions

Virtual public sessions will be held twice. This provides an opportunity for individuals who wish to testify but are unable to attend in person due to the following reasons:

- They no longer reside in the state.
- They are homebound or face transportation challenges.
- They have concerns about safety.

Truth Telling Office Hours

The commissioners will establish office hours, providing a private space for truth-tellers to share their experiences privately. There will also be an opportunity to opt in for a confidential session, meaning all personal information will be redacted for the record if requested. Truth telling office hours will also serve as an opportunity for individuals to learn more about the commission and its work before deciding to participate. Truth-telling office hours will be held at over 30 locations across the state, and virtual office hours will be available ensuring accessibility for all who wish to participate or seek information.

Online Submissions

For those who prefer to independently share their truths through audio recordings or written accounts, there will be an option to do so. Additionally, if individuals wish to express their truths through other forms, such as art, poetry, or short stories, they will have the opportunity to submit these works online as well.

Group Listening Sessions

Group listening sessions will be available for vulnerable populations who may feel more comfortable or better suited to sharing their truths in a supportive group setting. These sessions will offer a safe and confidential environment where individuals can come together to express their experiences in a communal atmosphere.

Phase IV Report Phase

The phase showcases multiple approaches, including the official legislative report outlining the Commission's recommendations, a historical anthology, a plain language version for the public, and a final presentation. Beginning with the official legislative report, the VTRC is mandated to complete a draft report six months prior to final submission, at which time the public will have the opportunity to offer comments and potential revisions.

This report will include recommendations of new laws or revisions to current laws and policies for the legislative body to consider. The report will also feature educational reform recommendations for potential programs, activities, and actions to repair harm and educate the public about disparities experienced by affected communities. The report will hopefully catalyze change at the legislative level and lay the foundation for continuation of truth telling and acknowledgment of harm.

As a gift to the Act 128 impacted community members and the Vermont community, the VTRC intends to include three additional ways to understand the impact of this meaningful time in history. **This is a historic process and the VTRC is committed to ensuring all Vermonters have engaging ways to interact with this process.**

These include:

- **Historical anthology to compile the research and truth telling**
- **Plain language and summary version for the public**
- **Final presentation to visualize the findings and celebrate this work**



Conclusion

This strategic plan is not traditional in the sense that it outlines goals of the commission. The Act 128 maps out the goals and framework for the work of the TRC.

This Commission, while temporary, is a beginning.

There are many activists and organizations that are doing pieces of this work and the efforts of the VTRC hope to bridge the gaps between laws, policies, and the everyday lived experiences of impacted communities.

**This is a community-centered endeavor.
Let us seek truth, justice, and healing together - FOR each other.**

To join us, go to the VTRC's website vtrc.vermont.gov to learn how to "Get Involved"

VTRC is excited to partner with you!



References

Phase I

- [Vermont State House - H.96 Truth and Reconciliation Commission Development Task Force 2/3/2022](#)
- [Vermont State House - H.96 Truth and Reconciliation Commission Development Task Force 2/22/2022](#)
- [Vermont State House - H.96 Truth and Reconciliation Commission Development Task Force 2/24/2021](#)
- [Vermont State House - H.96 Truth and Reconciliation Commission Development Task Force 3/11/2021](#)
- [Legislative Calendar](#)
- [VTRC Selection Panel Final Report | Vermont Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#)

Phase II

- [VTRC Interim Report – January 12, 2024.pdf \(vermont.gov\)](#)
- [Home | Vermont Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#)
- [Mission Statement and Pledge | Vermont Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#)
- [Emblematic Cases | Vermont Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#)
- [Meet the VTRC Team | Vermont Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#)
- [Committee Members | Vermont Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#)
- [ICTJ Papers | Vermont Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#)
- [Meetings | Vermont Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#)
- [Press Release | Vermont Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#)

For additional links and progress visit: vtrc.vermont.gov/

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