



OFFICE OF THE LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR

Vermont State House
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*****PRESS RELEASE*****

Lt. Governor Molly Gray Hosts First “Seat at the Table” on Broadband

Montpelier, Vt. — This afternoon, Vermont Lieutenant Governor Molly Gray hosted the first in a series of virtual meetings on issues facing Vermont communities entitled “Seat at the Table.” Over 50 Legislators, non-profit leaders and members of the public attended representing communities across Vermont.

Lt. Governor Gray dedicated this inaugural “Seat at the Table” to elevating the voices of Vermonters who have been most impacted by the state’s broadband gap.

Lt. Governor Gray stated, “The purpose of today’s event is to better understand the broadband needs this pandemic has uncovered and how we can unite across impacted groups and communities in a readiness plan as we work to close Vermont’s broadband gap.”

Speakers included Betsy Bishop, President of the Vermont Chamber of Commerce; Zach Tomanelli, Communications and Engagement Director of the VT Public Research Interest Group (VPIRG); Jessa Barnard, Executive Director of the Vermont Medical Society; Philene Taormina, Director of Advocacy for AARP-Vermont and Jay Nichols, Executive Director of the Vermont Principals’ Association. Lt. Governor Gray moderated the event.

Philene Taormina spoke to the needs of AARP-VT Members, many of whom are working to access and utilize broadband and related tools to combat isolation and access critical support services both of which were also challenges before this pandemic. Zach Tomanelli of VPIRG and Philene also addressed how the pandemic has transformed how Vermonter’s access and participate in government – or a “digital democracy” – at the local and statewide level and ways in which transparency and accountability have also shifted over the last year.

Philene stated, “As a result of this [pandemic] everything went online...it’s a radical step in transparency that AARP thinks is valuable to our members because it allows them to engage in the legislative process. Transparency creates trust. We are at a time where there is a trust and truth gap between government and citizens, and in order to create that trust, people need to get involved in government, and this is one way they really can.”



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Jay Nichols of the Vermont Principals' Association as well as Betsy Bishop of the Vermont Chamber of Commerce spoke to how hybrid learning and remote work may, in part, be here to stay and opportunities to address economic inequities and Vermont's demographic challenges. Jay stated, "We need to attract young working families [to Vermont] and one way to do that is to make sure we have great connectivity regardless of what your zip code is."

Jessa Bernard of the Vermont Medical Society spoke to the increased use of telemedicine over the last year, and the need address equity in access, particularly amongst vulnerable populations or already marginalized groups. Jessa and nearly all panelists noted that equity in access to broadband had to include the cost of access as well as the tools or hardware needed to close the digital divide.

A recording of the event is available to view on YouTube here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_7qbAasgPU

Vermonters wishing to attend future sessions, can register, and find additional information here:

<https://ltgov.vermont.gov/seatatthetable>.

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