

VSEA Legislative Priorities for the 2014 Legislative Session

I. We are Standing Up for Vermonters

A State Budget that Puts Low Income and Working Vermonters First; VSEA will Resist Cuts to State Services and the State Work Force

As the State addresses budget pressures due to the anticipated loss of federal funding, downgraded revenue projections, and costs associated with Hurricane Irene, VSEA will defend the critical state services that many Vermonters rely on. During challenging economic times, maintaining Vermont's infrastructure and social services is critical. VSEA will monitor the budget process and oppose any position cuts or furloughs while advocating for the quality of the services that VSEA members provide. In the event of a federal government shutdown, VSEA will oppose any furloughs for federally funded state employees. In the event of a furlough, VSEA will advocate that federally funded state employees funded in whole or in part by federal funds be compensated at their normal rate by the State during this time. In addition, VSEA will oppose any attempt to RIF federally funded state employees during a Government Shutdown.

Members of the VSEA believe too many Vermonters have to struggle to meet their basic needs. We have suffered from several years of reduction in investments and cuts to public services and to the state workforce that is comprised of the experts who deliver essential services to Vermonters on a daily basis. We believe that increased public investments are essential for ensuring our basic human rights to healthcare, housing, food, education, jobs and a dignified standard of living. VSEA supports a budget that addresses needs, advances equity and dignity, and enables people's participation. We support increasing state revenues to make this budget a reality.

Safe Patient Handling

Working with AFT, UNAP, and patient advocates, VSEA will support legislation to mandate safe patient handling procedures, including a ban on mandatory overtime for direct patient care providers. These measures will preserve the quality of in-patient care at facilities around the state by protecting staff and mandating adequate staff and equipment support in high-risk procedures.

Mental Health

State Employees working in the Mental Health System put patient care above all else and VSEA believes that the mental health system is for Vermonters and they should be taken care of by Vermonters. VSEA will strongly urge the state legislature to open the Berlin Psychiatric Care Center by June 1, 2014 and adequately staff the facility, with particular emphasis on nurses and frontline staff, so that our State Workers can provide the right care at the right time in the right environment. During the transition phase, VSEA will continue to monitor the system for any gaps in service.

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Retirement with Dignity for All Vermonters

State employee defined benefit retirement plans are central to the long-term financial security and wellbeing of many VSEA members, but they have increasingly come under attack as private sector retirement has worsened. VSEA believes that all Vermont workers should be able to retire with dignity. VSEA will work with members of the administration and the legislature to develop plans for a Secure Choice Pension Plan. Under this plan, state retirement administrators would manage an opt-in retirement fund for private sector workers. By making defined benefit plans available to all workers, VSEA hopes to ensure secure financial futures for all Vermonters and generate long term support for state employees' plans.

Economic Justice on Vermont's Campuses

VSEA will propose and support legislation called the "Fair Compensation in Higher Education Act." This legislation has three initiatives. The first initiative states that no employee at the State Colleges or UVM would get paid more than 8 times the lowest paid worker. The second initiative would limit the amount of a golden parachute to 5 times the current instate tuition rate. The third initiative would mandate a livable wage for all employees of Vermont State Colleges and UVM

Earned/Paid Sick Days

VSEA also supports the coalition that is working to advance legislation for paid sick days for all Vermonters.

Establishing a State Investment Trust/State Bank

VSEA will support and encourage the adoption of a state bank. We will work to educate elected officials on the positive economic impact of this proposal as recently concluded in a private study of the issue.

II. Improving Our Working Conditions

Address Inadequate Staffing in State Government

During the Douglas administration, the state workforce was downsized by almost 10%. The cuts not only resulted in the loss of VSEA members' jobs, but also have created long term challenges for VSEA members who provide essential state services with inadequate support.

In the Economic Services Department, new process management and low staff numbers are affecting employees' ability to deliver benefits and programming to vulnerable Vermonters. For example, the food stamp program has the second highest error-rate in the country after receiving "high payment accuracy" ratings just 3 years prior. The department has been sanctioned by the federal government as a result of its error rates. VSEA will argue that the Economic Services department needs more staff in order to curb the recent decline in the quality and accuracy of benefits delivery. VSEA will also advocate that federal fine allocations be directed toward staff training as part of the plans for correction that the state develops.

At the Vermont Veterans' Home, citations from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services have jeopardized the home's federal funding. The federal government is responsible for \$10 million or 2/3 of the VVH budget. VVH staff report that the citations were caused by inadequate staffing. Unlicensed providers are often asked to provide services beyond their purview, and many staff work excessive overtime. VSEA will continue to advocate for increasing staffing levels at VVH to complement the development of a new scheduling system that includes benefited part time workers. In addition to more staff, VSEA will seek to change the organizational placement of VVH within state government. Currently, VVH is controlled by an appointed board, reducing the capacity of elected officials to oversee or change policy. VSEA supports the election of a classified state employee who works at the Veterans' Home to serve on the Board of Trustees. VSEA will protect the collective bargaining rights of it's members by opposing management's attempts to remove employees from the bargaining unit. VSEA believes that placing the facility directly within state government would enable advocates and state office holders to resolve continued problems at VVH. VSEA will advocate for the appointment of an independent monitor to implement changes to VVH policy and practices in accordance with The Pulling Report of August, 2013

VSEA will continue to monitor the use of temporary workers throughout state government, particularly in the Department of Corrections, the Executive Branch and the Judiciary. VSEA will oppose policies that use temporary workers for long-term jobs.

State Employee Safety

VSEA will advocate for the state to provide additional and adequate security in state buildings particularly the Probation and Parole Offices, Courthouses, and the Rutland State Office building.

Furthermore, VSEA believes that state employees have a right to a peaceful and nonviolent environment that allows them to work in the most efficient and effective way possible to serve Vermonters. In view of this fact, VSEA will propose legislative and administrative penalties to be imposed on those who assault state workers and advocate for greater transparency and accountability from the state regarding assaults against state employees. VSEA will also advocate for the State to respect state workers who work in physically dangerous jobs in Vermont by assuming that, when an employee is injured at work, and applies for Workers compensation, it is automatically assumed that the employee was injured while doing their job.

Teleworking

VSEA recognizes the potential benefits of teleworking for state workers, and for ensuring continuity of state services and promoting environmental stewardship. State policy should encourage making teleworking options available for state employees whenever appropriate. VSEA will propose legislation that provides for a more fair and equitable application of the state's teleworking policy. Currently, it is at the discretion of individual managers and, as such, the policy is not applied fairly throughout the state. VSEA seeks to rectify this problem and will propose legislation that works toward a goal of at least 10% of the state workforce allowed to telework.

Relocation Policy

VSEA will advocate for a state policy for a more inclusive and forward thinking process that should be followed in the event the State wishes to move to a new worksite. This policy will foster a dialogue between State Employees, Management, and project managers to recognize and respect the expertise of state employees. In addition, VSEA will also advocate that this policy includes the use of a cost benefit analysis to be conducted for taxpayer transparency. VSEA believes that state employees can provide valuable input on their workspaces and working conditions that can often save the state money by preventing costly renovations in the future.

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Parking

In response to the parking crises faced in Montpelier and other Vermont Communities, VSEA formed a parking committee and successfully organized workers and members of the community to push for solutions to these crises. As a result of this advocacy, the state developed and implemented the capitol commuters program, which offers a 50% bus ticket subsidy to state employees in Montpelier. VSEA will continue to advocate for expanding the availability of these programs throughout the state and working with the state to find solutions that will help alleviate the crisis.

Corrections

VSEA will advocate for the state legislature to address the staffing crisis in the Department of Corrections. This includes advocating for more permanent full time positions, discouraging the use of temporary workers and curbing the use of mandatory overtime in order to promote greater stability and safety within facilities. Specifically with respect to discouraging the use of temporary workers, VSEA will propose legislation that limits the amount of hours temporary workers can work to a maximum of 1,040 hours per 365 day period. In addition, VSEA will also advocate for the state to provide health benefits and paid sick days for the temporary workers.

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III. Protecting Our Members and Our Retirees

Firefighter Liability

Currently volunteer and municipal firefighters are protected from civil suits filed against a worker personally for incidents that occur while the firefighter is working. The state employs firefighters through the National Guard and Department of Military who do not have this protection. VSEA will propose legislation to address this situation and extend these protections to firefighters who work for the State.

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Right to Privacy

VSEA will monitor and support legislation seeking to prohibit employers from asking for a password/username for a social networking site or requiring employees to login to their profile to see social networking activities.

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Oppose Chained CPI

VSEA will support a resolution to our congressional delegation and to the President of the United States opposing s called "Chained CPI" that will result in a cut to already modest social security benefits.

IV. Building a Stronger and More Powerful Union

Collective Bargaining Rights for All State Workers

The State has excluded several groups from representation under VSEA collective bargaining agreements by treating them as exempt employees or inaccurately positioning them outside of state government. VSEA opposes this practice because it is unfair to workers who deserve union rights and representation. VSEA is currently working with the staff to win union representation in the offices of State's Attorneys. At the legislature, VSEA will clarify language in Vermont statute to make it clear that Deputy State's Attorneys, Victims' Advocates, and Administrators in State's Attorney's offices belong in VSEA.

Oppose Privatization

Contracting out services not only results in less transparency and accountability, but often sends Vermont dollars out of state. Services once provided by state workers are increasingly being performed by contractors at higher costs with inferior results. Under the Douglas Administration the State's spending on private contracts had increased by 190%. VSEA will propose legislation to significantly strengthen the current privatization statute by protecting workers from economic losses. Private contractors would be required to guarantee that the savings generated by privatizing state functions is from innovation and better management, not by gutting workers' pay and benefits. Employees of the private contractor would have to be paid at the same level with the same benefits as state employees currently performing the functions being privatized. VSEA will work to identify contracts that should be eliminated and support performance-based contracting. VSEA supports establishing prevailing wage requirements, and requiring that all state construction contracts follow the prevailing wage. VSEA will also work to mandate that contracts are subject to the public records act. VSEA will propose extending the power of the attorney general to certify personal service contracts to privatization contracts as well. Vermonters will have a greater sense of confidence that private contracts actually deliver the same high quality services currently performed by state employees for fewer dollars without slashing wages and benefits.

Streamlining the Grievance Process, Protecting State Employees

In addition, VSEA will propose legislation to be able to bargain with the state for grievance arbitration. This would streamline the grievance process, make it less legalistic, and could potentially reduce the workload of the Vermont Labor Relations Board.

Establishing a Labor Education Center at a State-Run College or University

VSEA will advocate for creating a designated labor education center at a state college or university.

V. Securing Our Retirement & Health Care

Enhancing Early Retirement Benefits for State Employees in Overnight Facilities

Group F of the state employees' retirement plan includes a provision for penalty free early retirement for certain employee groups, including Vermont State Hospital workers and Woodside workers. Due to the high level of stress, the physical demands of their work, and the injuries experienced as a result of caring for Vermont's Veterans, VSEA will also propose that the nurses and caregivers at the Vermont Veteran's home be afforded the right to retire early without penalty.

Department of Public Safety Dispatchers argue that they also qualify for penalty free early retirement based on their working conditions. Emergency Dispatchers endure intense traumatic events in the course of their work which puts them at high risk for developing PTSD and other related conditions. VSEA will propose that the legislature include them in this plan.

Employees at Woodside who are part of the penalty-free early retirement exception are seeking to modify the terms of the exception to help more employees retire early. For many workers at Woodside the current benefit plan is too costly. VSEA will work to change the exemption to make it more practical for the employees it was intended to help.

Support Health Care Reform/ Oppose Cuts to State Employee Benefits

VSEA will monitor health care reform and continue to advocate for maintaining state employee benefits and bargaining rights to ensure no degradation of state employees' access to services and no increased costs for state employees. While VSEA active members will not be included in the health care exchange, VSEA will monitor how the exchange could affect retirees and ensure that retirees are not decoupled from active employees. VSEA will advocate for the state employee plan being used as the base plan for Green Mountain Care. VSEA's retirees will monitor dental coverage options and support more options to opt-in to dental plans.

VI. Holding Government Accountable

Whistleblowers

State Employees believe Vermonters have a right to ethical, transparent and efficient state government. They are the experts on the delivery of state services and are often uniquely positioned to provide lawmakers and the public with vital information about state government. VSEA believes that state employees who expose injustice and wrongdoing should be able to do so without fear of retaliation. Accordingly, VSEA will support legislation providing greater protections for whistleblowers.

Accountability for Department of Human Resources

VSEA will advocate for the state to respect State Workers right to due process. In this respect, VSEA supports timely resolutions of investigations. In addition, VSEA will support propose legislation that provides for greater legislative scrutiny of the management practices of the Department of Human Resources.

→ Doc investigations - AHS unit for Corvex
Sears + Shelling Bill

- PRA Legislation - looking at all
Exemptions - RH Base v

- CC Unions → Kate + Portia

- open Public Meetings → London / Portia
not Kate

S. 189 + S. 217
Jenette Br. W., Bennings etc.

- Lobbying + exec Branch employees not
working for one year after
Jenette

- Temporary employees → automatically below
Permit and Sick days S. 218
Jenette