

Vermonters Spoke; I listened.

Opinion Editorial by Lieutenant Governor Molly Gray

Over the last seven months, I spent a day per week in a different county in our state listening to the needs of Vermonters. I visited more than 29 communities, meeting with hundreds of Vermonters from more than 60 different organizations, businesses, and nonprofits. I heard hundreds of stories of innovation, perseverance, and resilience during the pandemic. Vermonters shared with me their personal and professional experiences navigating the challenges amplified by this pandemic and identified real solutions for a stronger recovery.

In November, I shared a “Recover Stronger Agenda for Vermont” with the Governor and the Legislature with 25 recommendations, based on what I heard and saw, on how to invest the historic \$2.7 billion in American Rescue Plan Act funds coming to Vermont. I outlined five top areas of investment in the report: workforce development, housing, child care, mental health and support services (especially for our young people), as well as broadband and cellular services. The first three issues, being top of mind for the Vermonters I met with. In every village, town, business, and home I visited, I heard the call for bold investments in workforce development to fill critical, good-paying jobs that already exist in our communities. I also heard we cannot achieve real progress on workforce development without also addressing two underlying and intersecting challenges; our urgent caregiving and housing needs.

Vermonters deserve to be able to live where they work and work where they live. That is what is good for families, good for business, and good for the environment. Moreover, without a “landing pad” for new workers, we will continue to struggle to recruit talent and meet our workforce needs.

In Rutland, for example, I heard that employers are losing new employees because market-rate rentals or workforce housing cannot be found. Meanwhile, a local developer had to abandon plans to build 200 rental units because wastewater and sewer infrastructure was not in place to support the project.

Using historic federal funding, we must support Vermont cities and towns in conducting audits of specific housing needs, in particular rental and workforce housing. We should establish grant opportunities for communities to meet those needs, including wastewater and sewer, housing development, home restoration, and weatherization initiatives that will bring new, energy efficient units online quickly. And, in light of Vermont’s unique housing crisis, we should request an additional extension of FEMA’s reimbursement policy of the General Assistance temporary housing program in order to ensure a place to live for housing insecure Vermonters while also relieving pressure on an already strained rental market.

In order to recruit and retain a workforce ready to meet the unique needs of our small, rural state with its aging populations, we must also double-down on our support for child care and family caregiving.

While meeting with leadership at the Family Center of Washington County, I heard first-hand of the challenges in keeping a child care center open, of recruiting and retaining early childhood educators, and of the rising number of centers closing across Vermont. Center leadership discussed how low wages, student loan debt and competition with other jobs with competitive salaries (including jobs at Dunkin Donuts and McDonalds) continued to drive down employee recruitment and retention. Moreover, since the start of the pandemic child care providers, many of whom continue to navigate their own caregiving responsibilities, remain stuck having to choose between caring for loved ones at home, paying the bills, and meeting the child care needs of their community.

Immediately, we must send a lifeline to child care providers to stabilize the workforce and keep centers open. To grow our workforce, we should create a targeted recruitment program through the Department of Labor and invest in student loan forgiveness for early childhood educators. We should also guarantee base funding for child care programs through the Child Care Financial Assistance Program (CCFAP) based on enrollment, as well as expand CCFAP eligibility and payments for child care. And for the future, we must make paid family and medical leave a reality for every Vermont family and caregiver.

This legislative session I will fight every day to ensure that the Vermonters already leading our recovery have their voices heard as we make critical decisions about how to best invest historic federal funding. The stakes are high and the decisions we make this year could be transformative for our state, communities, and families.

I invite you to read my full “Recover Stronger Agenda for Vermont” and to share your feedback and ideas by visiting <https://ltgov.vermont.gov/recover-stronger>.

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Lt. Governor Molly Gray serves as the 82nd Lt. Governor of the State of Vermont.