

Good morning Senator White and Committee,

Mark Hughes
Executive Director, Justice For All
Coordinator, Vermont Racial Justice Alliance
PR.2 Testimony
Senate Government Operations Committee
Room 4, Vermont Statehouse
April 12, 2019 1:15 pm

Good afternoon Madam Chair and Senate Government Operations Committee. For Committee record, I am Mark Hughes, Director of Justice For All and Coordinator for the Racial Justice Reform Alliance. I am offering additional testimony for your consideration as you move into your committee discussion and possible vote this afternoon.

Please restore the language that described [the original intent of the amendment](#) “to serve as a foundation in addressing systemic racism” to the proposal and ensure that language permitting slavery and criminalizing poverty be removed. Please also ensure that the language of freemen and freewomen is addressed in Chapter II of the constitution. We have accomplished much in our work to address systemic racism in Vermont.

In 2016, we filmed discussions with Washington and Chittenden County Senatorial candidates, asking their opinion on a full slavery prohibition constitutional amendment (Senator Pollina may recall). The Vermont Democratic Party (VDP) adopted the language to their platform the same year. In 2017 we successfully moved the historic Act 54, Racial Disparities in the Criminal and Juvenile Justice System Advisory Panel into law. The year closed with the Attorney General and Human Rights Commission Act 54 Task Force Report stating “People of Color have waited far too long for the equality we promise in word but not deed. It is time to remedy that wrong”

2018 introduced new hope as Racial Justice Reform Coalition advanced Act 9 into law. In it for the first time in history was legislation creating a panel and an Executive Director to “promote racial justice reform throughout the State by mitigating systemic racism in all systems of State government...” Last year, [House Resolution 25](#) was introduced to urge the 2019 Senate to pass a slavery prohibition constitutional amendment. Last year the VDP reaffirmed its platform position on the matter and the Vermont League of Cities and Towns unanimously voted in favor of the full slavery prohibition constitutional amendment. Earlier this year the Vermont Episcopal Dioceses Council and the Governor’s Workforce Equity and Diversity Council both unanimously voted in favor of PR.2, as introduced. This year, House Government operations has taken up the introduction of H.478, a bill that calls for a task force to study a State apology and a proposal for slavery reparations.

Countless folks have emailed, left messages with the Sargent at Arms and called you, even on your personal phones, all requesting the adoption of PR.2, as introduced. The numerous folks who have testified both in committee and in public hearing as well as over 700 people who have signed [this petition](#) all agree that the constitution should be amended to ensure that slavery is prohibited under all circumstances.

[Our original recommended language](#) was simple and satisfied all of the criteria of slavery prohibition, removal of the criminalization of poverty and addressing historical significant concerns. The constitution, statutes, rules, and governmental institutions are the fabric of a society that are bound together with a thread that was produced in a national history steeped in racism. As we continue this journey we implore you to address [our additional recommendations](#) that touch upon statutes, rules and even the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution.

The Vermont constitution must reflect our current State values. We cannot base our decisions in amending the constitution on our emotions, our wishes or even the truth of our history. Even if the Jacobs vs Supreme Court decision was a decision on the state constitutional intent of the language of slavery [\(it was not\)](#), the artifacts of the true nature of the abolitionist heart of Vermont should be placed in the capable hands of the Vermont Historical Society and memorialized in our historical archives.

This is the making of history. Please be on the right side of it.

Thanks you for your work on this and thank you for your service.

Respectfully,

Mark Hughes
Director,
Justice For All