

**Overview 2015/2016 Biennium**  
**Vermont House Committee on General, Housing & Military Affairs**  
**Rep. Gabrielle Lucke, Clerk**

The work of my committee has been fascinating. GHMA covers a wide range of issues and theme giving me amazing opportunities to expand my knowledge base, access to resources and opportunity to impact the lives of Hartford residents and Vermonters. Below you will find examples of the work over the past two years.

Major areas of work:

- Earned Leave
- Ban the Box
- Housing
- Alcohol
- Gaming
- Landlord - Tenant

**Earned Leave**

There are currently 60,000 Vermonters without access to paid sick time. These working Vermonters are too often forced to choose between taking care of themselves or a sick family member and taking home a paycheck. Low-income workers, including food service and childcare workers, are the least likely to have paid sick days. When employees are forced to go to work sick, everyone is put at risk. This issue touches so many Vermonters in so many ways as they struggle to stay healthy, support their families, and have economic security. Creating a minimum standard for paid sick days for all Vermonters is the right thing to do and makes Vermont a better place. This year, the legislature passed the healthy workplace bill, creating a minimum standard for paid sick days starting with the ability to earn up to three days off after one year of full-time employment. The Governor is signed this bill into law in early spring.

**Ban the Box**

Too often, one of our neighbors makes an unfortunate choice that has long lasting consequences and gives them a permanent criminal record. When that person is released after fulfilling their debt to society, they increasingly have a tough time finding their way back into their community due to the lack of housing, a lack of services and, sometimes, a lack of jobs for those that have been convicted of a crime. While the personal responsibility of the individual to rebuild bridges with their community is important, a conviction is a serious barrier to reintegration, as individuals must disclose their conviction on almost all job applications.

The legislature passed a law to “ban the box,” that is, to disallow the use of the box on job applications to weed out applicants based solely on a prior conviction. Checking off this box can doom the chances of an individual securing an interview at a time when they need normalcy – including a job and a place to live. A job is one of the best ways an individual can put their life back together.

This law follows the lead of an executive order signed last year banning the box on applications for state jobs. Potential employers will still be allowed to ask – at an appropriate time during

the employment interview process – if an applicant has been convicted, but banning the box gives these individuals a fighting chance and a foot in the door. It is a small but important step we can take to help in the rehabilitation of our neighbors and help prevent them from reoffending.

By "banning the box," Vermonters who have been convicted will be able to apply for a job with the confidence that, under most circumstances, their application will be initially considered solely on the content of the application or their resume. This is a seemingly small, but ultimately huge leg up for these Vermonters who are trying to stabilize their lives. Employers will still be able to ask if they were once convicted, and the applicant will have the chance to explain their history and recovery, but not until the employer has initiated contact with the applicant. This change has the potential to change lives, and we're proud to be the seventh state to take this step.

### **Housing**

This year's housing bill contains an extension of a down payment program approved last year from 3 to 7 years, and a pilot program that proposes a way to use existing programs to develop housing that can be made affordable to Vermonters who make between 80 and 120% of an area median income.

The down payment assistance program for first time homebuyers, administered by the Vermont Housing Finance Agency, has been a success in its first year of operation. As of late April, over 85 homebuyers have qualified for assistance, for homes that averaged \$160,000 in purchase price. Helping first time buyers is an important way to help make Vermont affordable for young families. The money for this program comes from the sale of tax credits by VHFA, and will be repaid by the homeowners when they sell their home or refinance. The funds in this program are limited in use to homebuyer down payment assistance, and when the money is repaid, it will be given out again to other first time homebuyers. By extending this program, VHFA will be able to create a true revolving fund, and will be able to help young families into the future.

### **Alcohol**

The 2016 alcohol bill was drafted in response to the 2015 Liquor Control Modernization Committee. The bill proposes to revamp the governance of the Department of Liquor Control by making the Commissioner an administration appointed position, instituting term limits on the Board of Liquor Control commissioners, and ordering a rewrite of Vermont's alcohol statutes so that they may become more flexible to our current licensing and economic development needs.

This bill also creates a process for destination resorts to lessen paperwork when it comes to hiring licensed caterers, clarifies which tax can be applied to samples, and allows for a pilot of transferring bulk amounts of malt between two companies substantially owned by the same owners. The Tax Department will study the potential impact on state revenue of this pilot, and if the study shows that we will not lose revenue based on foregone taxes, the program will continue. This legislation also adjusts citizenship requirements needed to hold a liquor license to include permanent residents.

## **Gaming**

Gambling, gaming and the lottery are sensitive issues in Vermont. We take seriously the charge to make sure we allow certain "pro-social" games to function (and provide some income to the state, or to nonprofit organizations) while preventing full-fledged gambling to take hold without substantial legislative review. This year we defeated proposals to allow the operation of Lottery machines in bars and restaurants, expand Lottery offerings, and broadly approve the operation of fantasy sports games.

Overseeing state sponsored gambling is a balancing act between maximizing revenue to the state while making sure the sale and use of the game is controlled through age or availability limitations. We remain open to a vigorous and extended public conversation and legislative review of the implications and ramifications of increasing our role in the expansion of gaming and gambling.

## **Landlord/Tenant**

The Legislature aims to balance the rights and responsibilities of landlords and tenants in law. This year we worked to ensure access to emergency housing and permanently affordable housing. At the same time, we acted on concerns about individuals who may be living in an apartment unlawfully, or without permission from the landlord. Representatives of landlords and tenants worked with the housing committee to craft an expedited eviction process for this situation. Under the new statute, a landlord may or may not allow subleasing. If there is a written lease that prohibits subleasing, this process could be used to remove someone who is living in the apartment who is not on the lease. This could be someone who "took over" a lease without the landlord's permission, or a "roommate" who is not on the original lease and does not have permission from the primary leaseholder.

The law also allows a process for the alleged unlawful occupant to prove that s/he is a lawful occupant. We needed to maintain some protections for the occupant so that people are not evicted without cause or due process who may indeed have permission to be there. This law achieves a balance that will allow landlords to regain possession of the premises sooner than under conventional ejectment law, while not taking away an occupant's right to prove they belong there.