**Vermont Interfaith Action Local Organizing Committees**

**Key Accomplishments, 2023**

**VIA has five statewide issue-based organizing committees that meet remotely:**

**Affordable Housing/Homelessness**

* persuaded the Governor and legislature to extend the state-run emergency shelter motel program in June, saving some 2,000 Vermonters from eviction.
* advocating strongly for services, shelter space, and rental subsidies for another 800 people who were evicted from the emergency program.
* organizing Burlington clergy and lay leaders to press the state to better coordinate with the city to handle the 250 additional unhoused people on the streets.
* organizing Central Vermont leaders to address the even greater demands on existing housing now that flooding has severely damaged 12% of that region’s units.
* sent a sign-on letter to the Governor and held a press conference to urge a response, which received coverage by [WCAX](https://www.wcax.com/2023/11/30/vermont-religious-leaders-call-governor-address-homeless-crisis/), [WPTZ](https://www.mynbc5.com/article/faith-coalition-calls-out-the-state-and-legislature-for-homeless-crisis-solution/46001955), and [VT Digger](https://vtdigger.org/2023/11/30/religious-and-housing-leaders-call-for-comprehensive-state-response-to-vermonts-housing-crisis/).

**Corrections Reform**

* after extensive research, decided to join the Decriminalize Vermont Coalition, supporting a harm reduction approach to drug use.
* helped get H222 passed this April, which authorizes drug checking services, permanently decriminalizes possession of buprenorphine, expands access to the opioid overdose-reversal drug naloxone, and provides additional funding for syringe services programs throughout the state.
* supporting a bill to establish at least two Overdose Prevention Centers in the state to address rampant public drug use and the huge increase in deaths by overdose.
* supporting Second Look legislation to provide the possibility of parole, with a judge’s approval, for those serving long prison terms and those sentenced previously to life without parole.

**Racial Justice/Economic Opportunities**

* partnering with the group that developed the Declaration of Inclusion, to convince every municipality in Vermont to adopt a statement to welcome everyone regardless of race, religion, age, disability, gender expression, etc.
* working with the Office of Racial Equity and the Vermont League of Cities and Towns to direct municipalities toward practical ways to show true inclusion in their policies and programs.
* participating in the Social Equity Caucus, a group of legislators and advocates who draft and encourage legislation to further economic equity.

**Racial Justice/Public Safety**

* partnering with Health Culture Education Fund to initiate “Safer Together Solution Burlington,” which canvassed residents and workers in the King Street Neighborhood to identify the most pressing concern around crime in the area.
* the next step is to facilitate and train a Task Force of community members in the neighborhood to find solutions for greater public safety, working within the community and with the police.
* a further next step is to replicate this model in other parts of Burlington and in other towns in Vermont.

**Immigration**

* partner with Migrant Justice on local initiatives like Milk with Dignity
* monitor the federal government’s use of Vermont prison facilities to detain undocumented immigrants
* urge Vermont’s Congressional delegation to champion immigration reform at the national level

**VIA has three additional regional organizing committees, staffed by locally-based professional organizers.**

**Brattleboro (WVIA)**

* core organizing team meets regularly to build relationships and conduct research on possible issues.
* held an exploratory event called “Climate Action and the Role of Faith Communities,” featuring speaker Bill McKibben and a panel of experts, to gauge interest for creation of an organizing committee on climate action.

**Upper Valley**

* building relationships with local congregations.
* exploring joint work on issues of mutual concern with Granite State Organizing Project in New Hampshire.

**Bennington**

* forming a core organizing team to consider possible issues, including establishment of a long-needed warming/cooling center for unhoused individuals.
* welcomed Bennington Interfaith Council collectively as a new member of VIA.

**VIA Corrections Reform LOM Update**

**October 2023**

The Corrections Reform Local Organizing Ministry (LOM) of Vermont Interfaith Action (VIA) is currently engaged with Second Look Legislation, the Decriminalize Vermont Coalition, and the Department of Corrections (DoC) as summarized below.

***Second Look Legislation***is a template created by the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers (NACDL). It seeks to put powers of resentencing back in the hands of a judge and would end life without parole sentencing. When a person who has served at least 10 years of a sentence petitions a judge for resentencing and the possibility of applying for a parole board hearing, the judge would have the right to deny it, but would need to give a reason. The person would then have a right to re-petition a judge every two years after that. Corrections Reform agrees with Vermont Senator Vyhovsky that this bill reflects the value that people should not be defined by their sentence and that everyone has a right to reprieve. A Second Look bill, S.155, has been viewed by multiple attorneys and was introduced at the end of the last legislative session. To learn more about this issue, Correction Reform members held online discussions with national advocates Dr. Brahani Reece and Alexandra Bailey, and also with Senator Vyhovsky who shared about the system she studied in Finland that prioritizes community building to incarceration. Corrections Reform will continue its study and discussion of this issue when the new legislative session resumes.

***[Decriminalize Vermont](https://decrimvermont.org/)*** is a coalition committed to ending the harms of Vermont’s drug laws and promoting policies focused on health, equity, and human rights. Our support for the coalition in 2023 has included participation in an April press conference that called for bold legislation to address Vermont’s growing overdose crisis. This met with some success in May 2023 when the Governor signed into law bill H.222 that is designed to address drug overdoses by authorizing drug-checking services; expanding access to naloxone, an opioid overdose-reversal drug; provide additional funding for syringe service programs; and decriminalizing personal possession of certain drugs. Corrections Reform members also attended a rally on International Overdose Awareness Day (August 31). Speakers included those with personal connections to the opioid crisis such as parents who have lost children to overdoses; politicians who see the overdose crisis as a public health priority and who support safe injection sites; and a number of harm reduction activists. More detailed coverage is available online at ["Rally at Burlington City Hall Park Honors Those Lost to Overdoses"](https://www.sevendaysvt.com/vermont/rally-at-burlington-city-hall-park-honors-those-lost-to-overdoses/Content?oid=39009149) and [International Overdose Awareness Day Rally in Burlington (video)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cip8uYPrWSU). To further support Decriminalize Vermont, Corrections Reform LOM approved and submitted the following statement for the Decriminalize Vermont website:

*As people of faith, we affirm the sacredness of persons and respect the dignity of all creation. We seek support over punishment, healing over brokenness, and love over fear. It is these shared values that guide us in our support of Decriminalize Vermont, a coalition that addresses substance use disorder as a public health crisis rather than a crime. As witnesses to our faith traditions, we join others in striving for better policies and safer spaces to support those who struggle with this disorder.*

In the coming legislative session, Corrections Reform will support Decriminalize Vermont in its push to legalize Overdose Prevention Centers (OPCs) as safe spaces for people to consume drugs they have obtained under the supervision of trained staff, without fear of arrest.

Corrections Reform sharpened its focus related to the ***Department of Corrections (DoC)*** through a meeting with Commissioner Nicholas Deml and Isaac Dayno, DoC Policy Director. We learned that Vermont’s longstanding relationship with the US Marshals Service now includes US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and Customs and Border Protection (CBP). There is no Vermont statute that prevents DoC from accepting detainees from ICE or CBP. At least 60 DoC beds are designated for detainees of these federal agencies, and the state’s General Fund is reimbursed $130/individual/day which in 2022 brought in revenue of about $1 million. Vermont does not have immigration courts, so most immigrant detainees are in DoC facilities for only a few nights before they are sent on to courts in Boston or New York City. Challenges of this arrangement include limited bed capacity for immigrant detainees; an urgent need for interpreter services (Spanish); and significant health issues such as tuberculosis of many immigrant detainees. This discussion also addressed access to [information on prisoners' profiles](https://doc.vermont.gov/content/research-and-data), the lack of a national best practice regarding gender identity of detainees, how the DoC relates to the Vermont legislature, and information on the new correctional facility for women. Construction of this facility, whose site is yet to be determined, is unlikely to begin for several years and will hopefully emulate a reentry facility in Maine that equips women with important skills to earn a living upon their release. Other topics covered were DoC’s work on recruitment and retention of staff such as staff bonuses and a six-week training that includes core competencies on communication, mental health, and suicide prevention. Currently 126 individuals sentenced in Vermont are detained in Mississippi. This number is down significantly from prior years (once more than 700 were sent out of state), but is not yet down to 0 because DoC facilities are old and have limited space. About 50–60% of those now detained in Vermont have been diagnosed with opioid use disorder. Based on that figure, DoC estimates that 80–90% have some kind of substance use disorder. Those with an opioid disorder are screened and receive medication-assisted treatment (MAT). DoC meets monthly with the [University of Vermont](https://www.uvm.edu/cas/justice-research-initiative-jri) and the [Urban Institute in DC](https://bjatta.bja.ojp.gov/ocp/urban-institute) to consider innovations and recommendations. One innovation in Rutland is an honors unit based on a very successful Scandinavian model. The unit, that includes a washer and dryer, is self-governing, autonomous, and unstaffed by correctional officers. Those in the unit sign a behavior contract.

In the coming year, VIA Corrections Reform LOM will continue its engagement with these issues and organizations to better align our actions with our faith-informed values. Feel free to contact [Debbie Ingram](http://Debbie@viavt.org.), VIA Executive Director and Corrections Reform Organizer, for more detailed information or if you have any questions.