**VIA Summary of 2022 Accomplishments**

**December 16, 2022**

Vermont Interfaith Action (VIA) is a federation of over 70 member and affiliated congregations, composed of approximately 16,000 Vermonters, that use a community organizing methodology to effect systemic change on social justice issues.

In 2022, VIA conducted its issue work through six separate Local Organizing Committees (LOCs) that despite the name, actually consisted of leaders across the state. These LOCs met via Zoom throughout 2022 to carry on their monthly meetings. Other organizing work took place on Zoom as well, which included research meetings with authorities and decision-makers on particular issues, and any special events, including our signature Public Actions, to move officials to commitments to the solutions we requested.

This is a brief summary of VIA’s accomplishments in these six issue areas:

**Abolish Slavery.** By far our biggest campaign was to pass Proposal 2, to amend the Vermont constitution to abolish slavery without exception. It was conducted in partnership with the Vermont Racial Justice Alliance. Lasting over a year and involving almost 300 volunteers in every region of the state, the campaign focused on many strategies to persuade voters to vote in favor of the proposal. These included:

* more than two dozen educational presentations on slavery and its legacy
* preaching at worship services in several congregations
* two launch events, one attended by 200 people in person on Juneteenth, and one attended by 50 people virtually
* tabling outdoors on Burlington’s Church Street and City Arts Market, at farmers’ markets in Barre, Montpelier, and Winooski, as well as Fourth of July celebrations in Williston and Greensboro
* tabling and voter registration at St. Michael’s College and UVM
* relational organizing, with trained volunteers methodically reaching out to friends, family, co-workers, and congregation members
* focus groups to identify the best messaging to persuade the largest possible electorate
* social media posts and paid ads
* radio ads
* earned media on every television station, Seven Days, VT Digger, and Vermont Public Radio
* opinion pieces in many newspapers throughout the state
* door-to-door canvassing and phone banking to over 20,000 households
* widespread distribution of T-shirts and lawn signs

All of this resulted in the passage of Prop 2 with 81.5% of the vote (10% voted no and 8.5% did not cast a vote on the measure). *This is the largest and most successful campaign that VIA has conducted in its 18-year history.*

**Racial Justice/Economic Opportunities**

VIA has an LOC made up of leaders from All Souls Interfaith Gathering, First Congregational Church of Burlington, College Street Congregational Church, Christ Church Presbyterian and First Unitarian Universalist Society of Burlington that concentrates on racial justice, specifically with regard to economic opportunities. The group concentrated on two main goals: 1) passage of bills in the state legislature to promote home ownership and business supports for BIPOC individuals, and 2) adoption by towns and cities in Vermont of a “Declaration of Inclusion (DOI).” The bills leaders were following met many obstacles and did not pass in their entirety, although certain measures from each were incorporated in other bills. The group did have strong success in promoting the DOI to congregations across Vermont to spearhead requests to their local governing body. As of December 1, 2022, 83 of Vermont’s 246 towns have signed on, and the originators of the DOI credit VIA with much of that success.

**Racial Justice/Public Safety**

This LOC is made up of leaders from All Souls Interfaith Gathering, First Congregational Church of Burlington, College Street Congregational Church, Christ Church Presbyterian and First Unitarian Universalist Society of Burlington. It focuses on re-imaging public safety and has done extensive research with police chiefs in many municipalities, as well as with legislators, state officials, and police commissioners. From this self-education process came the idea to develop a “Vermont Guide to Community Engagement with Local Police Departments,” which the group unveiled in April of 2022. Leaders identified a need for local community members to interact more fully with their police to understand how the force functions, from training to officer standards to data on use of force and traffic stops to policies and practices. The VIA Guide offers a series of questions in these and other categories to guide a conversation that would be initiated by ad hoc local groups. Since the launch, LOC members have been reaching out to congregations throughout Chittenden County to help them form such local groups and assist them in the process of engaging police.

**Corrections Reform**

This LOC started as a group of parishioners from the Cathedral Church of St. Paul (Episcopal) in Burlington and has expanded to include leaders from Christ Church Presbyterian, Good Shepherd Lutheran in Jericho, Good Shepherd Episcopal in Barre and All Souls Interfaith Gathering. This year their focus has been on building a relationship with the new Commissioner of the Department of Corrections and ensuring that continued progress is made under his leadership in developing a more restorative and humane organizational culture in Vermont prisons, both for residents and for corrections officers. The LOC has also turned its attention primarily to women’s concerns this year. VIA, along with allies, was responsible for the reinstatement of the position of Director of Women’s Services, which will help to improve programming for women. VIA is currently seeking to ensure that the risk assessment tool, which will be used to determine the size of a proposed (and desperately needed) new facility for women, will contain gender-specific elements in order to accurately determine future needs for the women.

**Affordable Housing/Homelessness**

This LOC consists of leaders from Unitarian Church of Montpelier, Old Meeting House in East Montpelier, Christ Church Episcopal in Montpelier, Good Shepherd Episcopal in Barre, a Buddhist community in Burlington, Christ Church Presbyterian in Burlington, and Guilford Community Church. The group conducted an energetic campaign to ensure that a significant portion of the large amount of federal dollars sent to the state during the pandemic was directed toward housing. As a result of the efforts of VIA and allies, the legislature allocated over $300 million in 2022 to build additional units of housing throughout the state. The group also repeatedly brought to the attention of the administration, the legislature, the media, and the general public the dire need for continuation of the Vermont Emergency Rental Assistance Program (VERAP) for precariously housed Vermonters. Through press conferences, vigils, and sign-on letters, VIA held the government accountable for its insensitive and inconsistent management of the program, as officials often assured recipients that their temporary housing in motels could be continued for a certain number of months, only to tell them a short time later that they would be out on their own before that period reached its completion. This inhumane and immoral treatment motivated the VIA group to write a Housing Policy Paper with Six Steps to Solve the Crisis, as well as to join a “Housing for All” Coalition (along with Rights and Democracy and Vermont Legal Aid). The LOC will focus heavily on advancing both these aspects of their campaign during the new legislative session.

**Immigration**

Through VIA’s affiliation with the national network Faith in Action, we have been able to participate in the federal issue of immigration reform. 2022 marked much disappointment with regard to getting a pathway to citizenship for large segments of the 11 million undocumented persons in the U.S., as well as outright setbacks to the protections previously afforded to DACA recipients. Our LOC will continue to work with Faith in Action as their new strategy unfolds, and in the meantime we are turning our attention to the state’s sheriffs. Sheriffs in many states have great leeway to cooperate with ICE and Homeland Security officials in targeting undocumented persons at work, home, or community sites. Our LOC is doing research to see where these practices are being conducted in Vermont and will take action to hold Sheriffs accountable for them.