



Vermont Workers' Center

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Put People First: The People's Budget Campaign

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

How is our economic crisis linked to human rights?

In this economic crisis, made worse by the aftermath of Tropical Storm Irene, many Vermonter struggle to meet their fundamental needs, such as food, healthcare, housing and education. The destruction of people's homes and livelihoods by the flooding, on top of repeated cuts to public services and the lack of good jobs, is taking an additional toll on the people of Vermont. The storm has exposed deep inequities in our state and led to further impoverishment of many already disadvantaged communities. Yet all people have basic human rights that should guarantee a life with dignity.

We have human rights simply because we are human. Human rights come from our human needs. To enable us to live our lives with dignity, we have the right to an adequate standard of living, free of poverty and with all our fundamental needs met. We are all endowed with human rights even if those rights are not expressed in a law or promoted by government. Our government must respect, protect and fulfil human rights, especially during times of crisis, when our needs increase.

Some communities are hit particularly hard during a crisis, such as working class and low-income people, children and seniors, women, people of color and people with disabilities. In the aftermath of Irene, for example, mobile home residents have been especially affected by Vermont's lack of affordable housing. Human rights require that every effort be made to address the needs of these most affected groups first in order to reduce inequities.

What are our basic economic and social rights?

Everyone has the right to live in a way that is dignified, is healthy and meets their fundamental needs. We all need to eat, have a home, stay healthy, learn and make a living. Our needs give rise to our economic and social human rights, which include:

- healthy food
- housing
- health, including healthcare and a healthful environment with clean air and water

- education
- a job with dignity
- social protection and security (e.g. if we become unemployed, sick, disabled, old or experience other events that we need help with)
- the right to organize, such as in labor unions, tenant associations and other groups

In order to enjoy these rights, some important conditions must be fulfilled. For example, we need transportation to get to our doctor, our job or our school, and we need childcare to be able to work full-time. These are essential elements of our economic and social rights.

What is the role of government?

We come together and govern ourselves in order to serve the needs of our communities. Elected by us, our government is meant to be **BY** the people, **OF** the people and **FOR** the people. Although Vermont's citizen legislature should be accountable to us and serve our needs, government **FOR** the people does not usually happen without further pressure from the people. Often our government caves in to influence from big business and those with money and power. Yet the people we elect to represent us are supposed to act in a way that is best for all people of Vermont and that puts people's needs before any other interests. Our government is required to respect, protect and fulfil human rights, so that all people can meet their needs and live a life with dignity.

What does the state's budget have to do with this?

We all contribute to the pot of money our state uses to pay for public services, public infrastructure, public jobs and benefits. We pay our sales, income and other taxes and fees, and the state's budget combines our money and says what to spend it on. In order to have enough money to spend, the legislature decides how to raise revenue, which means how much tax (and fee) money to collect from whom. Currently, low and middle income Vermonters pay more of their family income into the common pot than wealthy Vermonters. This difference is not fair; it contradicts the human rights principle of equity. Moreover, the money collected by the state is not sufficient to pay for the essential services we require to meet Vermonters' needs. Our state has been cutting necessary public services and public jobs, instead of raising new revenue to meet our growing needs during the economic crisis. Because the aftermath of Tropical Storm Irene adds to this crisis, continued cuts to our budget will leave even more Vermonters behind, forcing them to fend for themselves. If the state's budget were guided by human rights principles, it would put people first and always raise and spend money in an equitable way to meet the fundamental needs of all Vermonters.

What are Vermont's human rights obligations?

Vermont's obligations are to respect, protect and fulfill our human rights, including our rights to healthcare, housing, education, food and decent jobs. The same obligations apply to the federal government and to local government. Our government must not violate our human rights, and it is required to protect us from human rights violations by others, including private companies. At all times, our government must take concrete measures to advance the full realization of our economic and social rights. It has an obligation to provide essential public goods for everyone, such as healthcare, education and housing. By taking concrete actions Vermont can make progress toward satisfying our economic and social

rights. Our government should have a concrete plan of action that says how our rights will be fulfilled and how it will raise and spend money according to people's abilities and needs. Even in an economic crisis, our government must not allow any backsliding on our enjoyment of human rights, which means it must never make conditions worse for people. For example, Vermont must not cut essential public services or weaken regulations that protect us from disasters or from actions of private companies.

What about human rights principles such as universality and equity?

Vermonters have fought for universal healthcare, provided as a public good and financed equitably, which means people will get the care they need and contribute to the system according to their abilities. Similarly, Vermonters can also hold the government accountable for providing other essential public goods, such as education, housing or housing assistance, public transportation, a healthy environment and other public services that people need. "Universality" means that every person's fundamental needs must be met, regardless of how much money they have. "Equity" means that Vermont must raise and spend public money in a way that improves the lives of those who are most disadvantaged and that our state must make a particular effort to provide public services and jobs for those who need them the most.

What would a People's Budget look like?

First of all, a People's Budget would be developed with participation from the people. We have the right to participate in how decisions are made in budgeting, since those decisions will affect the enjoyment of our human rights. Moreover, only by making our voices heard can we ensure that Vermont's budget will meet our needs. Meeting people's fundamental needs would be the main goal of a People's Budget guided by human rights principles. This means that when the governor and our representatives come up with budget proposals, they would have to tell us how those proposals will help protect and realize our human rights. In other words, the budget would have to include enough money for the necessary public goods that enable all Vermonters to live healthy and dignified lives (e.g. healthcare, education, housing or housing assistance, public jobs or job programs and other social services). This money would have to be shared so that communities who are disadvantaged (for example those affected by Irene, or those without a job or earning very little, or people with disabilities) are supported the most. People's fundamental needs may not always be the same, but we should each get what we need when we need it. Meeting everyone's needs would help increase equality in Vermont. In order to make sure that Vermont's budget really meets people's actual needs, we could require that, each year, the state has to measure how well it is doing in increasing people's well-being and satisfying our human rights.

Where should the money come from to meet people's needs?

Vermont does have the means to meet all of our fundamental needs. Even with a prolonged economic crisis and the Irene disaster on our hands, we remain a reasonably prosperous state in a prosperous country. The human rights crisis we are facing — in healthcare, lack of jobs and lack of affordable housing, especially for flood survivors — is largely due to misguided political actions that deny us our rights. The budget shortfalls in Vermont and across the country were caused by years of tax cuts for the rich, corporate tax breaks and loopholes — in other words, by an unfair and inequitable sharing of resources. The rich and

corporations are not paying their fair share despite benefiting hugely from public spending. That is why there is a hole in our budget.

Vermont and the federal government are using budget deficits and rising debt as an excuse to deny us our human rights. Yet according to human rights standards, governments cannot point to a lack of money as a reason for failing to meet people's fundamental needs. This is because our governments must make every effort to raise money, through taxes or through borrowing, and then spend it in a way that puts people's needs first. Borrowing money during bad times is a suitable way to put the economy back on track and make sure that people can cope with a crisis (debt should then be paid down during good times). However, both Vermont and the federal government have refused to raise enough revenue and to spend it on what people really need. This is why many of us are unable to meet our needs and why we have our rights denied. A People's Budget, on the other hand, would put people first and seek to meet our communities' needs. If we focus on human rights and public goods, rather than on corporate welfare and the private interests put forward by expensive lobbyists, then we will easily find the money to meet all of our fundamental needs.