

Disability Awareness Day at the VT State House News:

## **Disability advocates visit Statehouse, raise budget concerns, recall Brandon Training School**

by [Alicia Freese](#) | March 29, 2013 VT DIGGER

Several hundred people descended upon the Statehouse Thursday to celebrate Disability Awareness Day. Disability rights advocates caught the ears of lawmakers during breaks in the tax and budget bills debate.

The annual event was organized by the Vermont Coalition for Disability Rights and Vermont Developmental Disabilities Council.

The advocates used the day to mark the 20th anniversary of the closing of the Brandon Training School, which housed developmentally disabled people in an institutionalized setting, and the subsequent transition to a community-based model of care.

Activists also sought to call attention to what they say is a troubling element in the proposed 2014 budget— a reduction of \$2.5 million in the Developmental Services division of the Department of Disabilities and Aging (DAIL). They are worried this will result in cuts to services provided to people with developmental disabilities.

Karen Topper of Green Mountain Self-Advocates released the following statement: “The last thing we need are cuts to developmental services, but this is exactly what Gov. Shumlin’s proposed budget would bring us. When Vermont closed the Brandon Training School in 1993 it made a promise that people with developmental disabilities would lead lives of dignity in the community. We need a budget that honors this promise.”

Sen. Sally Fox, D-Chittenden, who helped litigate the court case that ultimately closed the Brandon Training School, spoke to advocates at lunchtime. Fox announced to the crowd that the Senate had just passed S.27 — a bill that revises offensive language that remains in Vermont’s statutes — prompting spirited applause.

Among the changes, the term “mental retardation” will be purged from state statute. An “insane person” will be identified as “any person incapacitated by reason of

mental disability” instead of its current definition: an “idiot, non compos, lunatic a distracted person.”

The bill’s stated intent is to “recognize persons as opposed to their disabilities.” In other words a “deaf person” will now be referred to as a “person who is deaf.”

The term “handicapped person” will be supplanted by “person with disability.”

Fox gave the advocates credit for bringing about the changes. “I congratulate you for that victory.”

The day’s events also included speeches from people who had lived at the Training School. Among them was Robert Brace, whose case Fox had helped to settle in 1980.

A woman who was at the school from age 7 to 14 recalled the regimented lifestyle. “I was told what to do every day like what time to go to bed, what time to get up, what time to eat breakfast and finally, what time to go to the bathroom.” She said the arrangement was humiliating and she felt “labeled,” but added “I was one of the lucky ones ... some of my friends were not so lucky ... I saw a lot of them get abused.”

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