

**Statement of Senator Leahy
Vermont Commission on Women
50th Anniversary Celebration
April 2, 2014**

MR. LEAHY. The Vermont Commission on Women this year celebrates its 50th anniversary. Established in 1964 by Vermont Governor Philip Hoff, the Commission was established in response to a challenge presented by President Kennedy, urging every state in the country to create such Commissions “to encourage women to use their abilities, and to reduce discrimination against women.” I am proud that Vermont’s is one of the oldest continuously operating Commissions in the United States.

The Commission’s work is fueled by 16 volunteer Commissioners, a team of advisors and a small but energetic staff. By advocating for new state laws and strengthening old ones, the Commission has fought to reduce gender discrimination, achieve pay equity, support families and create job opportunities for women in my home state. Just last year, the Commission was a strong force in strengthening provisions of Vermont’s Equal Pay Act, so that women move closer to the reality of receiving equal pay for equal work. The law also extended protections so that employees could ask coworkers about their pay, and perhaps learn of disparities, without fear of retaliation.

I have no doubt the Commission’s ongoing efforts have helped Vermont women narrow the gender pay gap, to 84 cents for every dollar earned by a man. And Vermont is leading the way in this area: the national level finds women earning 77 cents for every dollar earned by their male counterparts. I am grateful to the Commission for its ongoing support for the Paycheck Fairness Act, which the Senate will consider in the coming weeks.

The Commission also serves as a needed source of information. Its handbook, The Legal Rights of Women in Vermont, serves as a valuable guide for women who may find themselves in need of advice on matters such as adoption, employment rights, housing and divorce. The Commission also conducts research, coordinates conferences and workshops, and engages in partnerships, all in the interest of furthering gender equality.

Despite the great strides that have been made over five decades in Vermont and across the nation, we know that many discriminatory issues affecting women still exist today, and that the need for the Commission’s work is still critical.

The state of Vermont is very fortunate to have such a strong group advocating for women’s rights. I have been proud to work with the Vermont Commission on Women for over 15 years on Vermont’s Women’s Economic Opportunity Conference, an annual event in Vermont that brings women of all different backgrounds together to talk about the challenges facing women in the work place.

I am proud to acknowledge and honor the Vermont Commission on Women as it celebrates 50 years of leadership and achievement.

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