

PRESS RELEASE

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2023 - A Year of Achievement, Growth, and Recognition for the Vermont Declaration of Inclusion Initiative

Rutland, VT – In 2023, the Vermont Declaration of Inclusion Initiative completed the third full year of its statewide effort, grew internally, and was recognized by several Vermont organizations.

At year's end, 131 cities and towns had adopted the Declaration of Inclusion. Nearly 73% of Vermont's population resides in those towns. Members of the Initiative are continuing to reach out to the remaining municipalities. For those interested in adopting the Declaration and which have not yet heard from the Initiative, contact us at al@wakefield-global.com.

The Initiative was started by Bob Harnish of Pittsford and Al Wakefield of Mendon in 2020. Norm Cohen of Rutland was recruited shortly afterwards, Barbara Noyes Pulling of Rutland Town came on board at the end of year two. In 2023, Patti Lancaster of Mendon, a retired public defender and prisoner rights attorney, joined the Initiative to lead its Implementation efforts. She will help those municipalities that adopt the Declaration to put it into action. "After adopting a Declaration of Inclusion, it is just words on paper until a community brings it to life," said Harnish. "We are here to help communities incorporate those thoughts and words into their daily actions and interactions so that everyone feels welcome, respected and included."

The initiative, a totally volunteer effort, was recognized by several statewide organizations during 2023. In May, it was recognized by Vermont Interfaith Action for its efforts. In August, the Initiative received the Vermont Council on Rural Development's Vermont Community Leadership Award. Throughout the year the Vermont Chamber of Commerce and the Vermont League of Cities and Towns continued the indispensable support which they have both provided from nearly day one of the Initiative.

Other highlights during 2023 were the start of collaboration with Vermont Futures, the Vermont Student Anti-Racism Network, and the adoption of the Declaration by the Stowe Area Association, the City of Rutland School Board, and other organizations around the state.

Yet, the Initiative is fully aware of how much work lies ahead. "The horrific shooting of three young Palestinian students, the exodus of several black leaders from municipal, educational, and elected positions due to racist experiences, and the daily difficulties and indignities experienced by persons of color and other marginalized groups tells us how far we have to go," said Wakefield. "It underscores the importance of municipal leaders publicly embracing the principles of the Declaration by adopting it."

Additional information on the Vermont Declaration of Inclusion may be found at vtdeclarationofinclusion.org. This website is generously furnished by and maintained by the Vermont Chamber of Commerce.

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