

DEMOCRACY DISPATCH PODCAST

Episode 16: Addressing Legislative Pay (w/ Rep. Emma Mulvaney-Stanak)

INTRO

Welcome to the Democracy Dispatch podcast. I'm Justin Marsh, Political Outreach Director at Vermont Conservation Voters. This is your weekly scoop on legislative action as we work to push forward environmental policies for Vermont. Each Monday, we will take a look back at the week prior, preview the week ahead, and speak with legislators and advocates on topics affecting our air, water, open space, and quality of life.

On today's show, Lauren chats with Senator Ruth Hardy of Addison County for our deep dive conversation about ranked choice voting and the PFAS and toxics bill. Later on, I speak with the House Progressive Caucus Leader, Representative Emma Mulvaney-Stanak for a conversation about legislative pay as well as some of her party's initiatives this biennium.

But first, I'm joined by Lauren Hierl, Executive Director of Vermont Conservation Voters for the Session Shakedown segment, where we recap the week prior and look to the coming week of the session.

SESSION SHAKEDOWN

JUSTIN MARSH: The Senate moved quickly on action around the Affordable Heat Act last week after the House approved it. What is the scoop on S5?

LAUREN HIERL: Yeah, the Senate decided to concur with the House version of the Affordable Heat Act, which means they basically just accepted the changes that the House had made. And so now it goes right to the governor. And so we'll be continuing to work knowing that the governor has indicated very strongly that he plans to veto this bill. That means that the bill will then come back to the legislature and they have the opportunity to override the veto. So in order for that to happen, we would need 20 votes in the Senate and 100 votes in the House. So we'll be working really hard to line up those votes and see if we can get this bill into law this year.

JM: Yeah, is the timeline setting it up that potentially a veto override could happen before they adjourn?

LH: It's possible. I think, you know, everything would need to move on the calendar as efficiently as possible. So there's a chance that could happen. And otherwise, our understanding is the legislature is planning to come back in mid to late June for a veto override session, knowing that there's a number of bills that we anticipate the governor will likely veto. So, so yeah, stay tuned on the timing. We'll see.

JM: Got it. The Senate also continued their work on House bills that were sent over to them at crossover, including H158, the modernized bottle bill, and H126, otherwise known as 30 by 30. What progress was made last week on those two bills and any progress for this week?

LH: Both of those bills have now passed with strong votes out of the Senate Natural Resources and Energy Committee and have been sent to money committees. So... The updated bottle bill is currently sitting in the Senate Finance Committee and hoping for a vote on that soon. And the 30 by 30 biodiversity bill is currently in the Senate Appropriations Committee and again hoping to see action on that soon. Both of those bills, there were relatively modest changes in the Senate, so we're hoping those will move forward, get strong votes, and then that the House would hopefully just adopt those changes and move forward and get them sent off to the governor.

JM: Awesome. And over on the House side, the Committee on Environment and Energy has been working diligently on S100, the housing bill. What is the latest there?

LH: Yeah, the committee has been, you know, working through all of the many aspects of the bill. So hearing a variety of perspectives and, you know, really honing in on what changes that they want to make. We are anticipating that they will move that bill relatively soon. It then does need to go to the Ways and Means and Appropriations Committees. So still has a bit of a path to follow. But this is obviously a huge priority of the legislature. So we're anticipating that that will kind of keep moving at a relatively quick pace through the process. And once we see where the House Environment and Energy Committee has kind of landed. We can give a more detailed update on what the core provisions are of what's made it through that key committee.

JM: Fantastic. And you had the opportunity to chat with Senator Ruth Hardy of the Addison District who chairs the Senate Government Operations Committee and sits on the Health and Welfare Committee. You touched base on the PFAS and Toxics Bill as well as rank choice voting and legislative pay. Let's hear that conversation now.

DEEP DIVE

LAUREN HIERL: I'm very excited to be joined today by Senator Ruth Hardy from Addison County. And I have had the pleasure of working with Senator Hardy before she was a Senator even when she was running Emerge Vermont, a really critical partner and player in recruiting amazing women to run for office. And now she is the chair of the Senate committee on government operations and also serves on the health and welfare committee. And both committees have been working on really important VCV priority issues. So thanks so much for joining us today.

RUTH HARDY: Oh, you're welcome. It's great to be here, Lauren. Thank you.

LH: Great. So Senator Hardy, can you give us a quick update on rank choice voting? Can you remind us just what that bill does, which your committee passed out and what you anticipate on that bill in the final weeks of the session?

RH: Yeah, thanks. So the Ranked Choice Voting Bill, S32, is in the House Government Operations Committee, and I hope they will vote it out next week with very few changes to what we did. In the Senate, we created sort of a three-tiered bill that starts with the ability of local towns to opt into a Ranked Choice Voting for their... for their local elections, for municipal elections, for select board, mayor, that kind of thing. And ranked choice voting is really a system where you can say, this is my first choice candidate, my second choice, my third choice, my fourth choice, and all of your vote, your vote will matter no matter who is the top candidate, the second candidate, third candidate, fourth candidate. So there are no wasted votes in ranked choice voting. It's also a voting system that really, tries to do away with the really divided partisan bickering that we're seeing at the national level. So it creates a much less divisive campaign for elected office. And so that's one of the things that we think it's really good for our democracy, for voters to have more choice and more say and to have not have wasted votes. So it creates the municipal option and then a study committee that would work toward using ranked choice voting in the 2026 election statewide. So for the statewide offices in 2026, it could be federal or state offices at that point. And then moving toward ranked choice voting for the presidential primary election in 2028. So really just this tiered, phased in use of ranked choice voting starting possibly next year with municipal. municipal elections if towns want to do it. So we're really excited about it. And as one of my colleagues, Senator Vyhovsky said, it's easy as ice cream. We got to sample ice cream and rank our favorite ice cream. And so that's what we think. It's as easy and as fun as ice cream.

LH: Excellent. Well, we're excited to see the progress. Always good when something can be as fun and easy as ice cream. Not always the case at the State House, so that's great.

RH: That's right.

LH: Excellent. Well, excited to see the progress of that bill and appreciate all your efforts leading on that. Another VCV priority was the bill to ban PFAS and other toxic chemicals from cosmetics, menstrual products, textiles, and turf. And your other committee worked on that bill, and you've always been a really strong supporter of legislation to better protect people from toxic chemicals. So just wanted to get your reflections on how that bill went in the Senate and what you hope to see next for it.

RH: Yeah, that's great. I mean, that was a really important bill that Senate Health and Welfare did. And what, what really struck me as I think I've mentioned to you before, Lauren, is that we have come so far on this issue. We had a unanimous, tripartisan vote on the Senate floor on that bill. We had a unanimous vote in our committee with two Republicans and three Democrats voting for it. And it is really an issue that everybody sees the impact of toxic chemicals on our everyday lives. And everybody knows somebody who's been impacted, who's gotten cancer or some other really horrible health effect because of PFAS and other toxic

chemicals. So I think it's really in the mainstream now in Vermont that we know it's important to keep these out of the products that we use every day. And the other thing about that bill that was really striking to me is that a lot of the products that we were talking about were products that are specific to women's health and hygiene. Menstrual products and health and beauty aids, unfortunately, are used more by women than men at this point. And I think that it was really striking to make sure that we are keeping women safe and not having our bodies impacted by toxic chemicals. And then also outdoor gear and turf that everybody uses. And I just hope that we move forward and broaden out to start being able to look at these toxic chemicals by class and not do these one-offs for each individual type of product. But I'm just really thrilled at how far we've come, even in just the five years I've been here in the Senate, that this has really evolved to a thing that we all really agree on is important and that we need to move forward with banning these toxic chemicals. Thank you for watching. I'll see you next time.

LH: Yeah, that's great. It's so true. We used to spend so much time having worked on these issues for more than a decade just trying to make the case that these things were actually toxic and there were actually harms and the conversation has shifted so much. So that's such good points you're making and it's giving optimism that we can do more and look at the issues. So that bill is now in the House Human Services Committee and we're hoping that they're going to start the conversation on that bill. So we're going to keep pushing for that.

RH: Oh, yeah.

LH: I know time is getting short, but keep pushing for action on that if we can. And then finally, our next guest on the podcast is going to be speaking a bit more about legislation to update and improve legislative pay and benefits. And we think this is a really critical issue to make serving in the legislature more accessible and bring the voices of more diverse Vermonters into elected office. And just wanted to give you the chance before we let you go to give any reflections on that bill.

RH: Yeah, thank you. S39, a bill that the entire Senate Government Operations Committee sponsored and voted for. And we agree. We think it's really important that we have the pay sort of range and benefits package that enable everyday Vermonters to serve in the legislature. You mentioned that I used to be the executive director of Emerge Vermont. and retain women in elected office for a very long time. And it can be a real burden for sort of everyday people to come to the state house and serve, to leave their families, to put in hundreds and hundreds of hours of really difficult and really important work, and to be paid so little. We get paid about \$14,000 a year to do... one of the most important jobs in our state government, which is literally making the laws of our state. And so we really wanna make sure that you don't have to be retired or independently wealthy to have this job, that you're able to come and serve, whether you're a young Vermonter, a Vermonter who's a parent, a Vermonter who has lived in poverty. We want people, a diverse group of Vermonters to be able to come and serve if they've been elected and to be able to stay long enough to have an impact. It's not supposed to be a career, but it's also not supposed to be a job that only a select few people can do. And we think having

fair pay is important. It's also a constitutional requirement of the office that we are paid fairly so that more Vermonters can do this work. So many people have left the legislature. not just because of retirements, but because they couldn't sustain their family and support their family while also serving in the legislature. So we want to make sure it's a more accessible job for people, a more accessible position for people to consider having. And that's why we're really, really hopeful that the House will take up that bill and pass it this session so we can really set the legislature up for the those going into effect next biennium, none of us would get those pay increases. It would be next biennium. So people would have to be reelected or new people would have to be elected before the salary increases went into effect. So hopefully House members are listening and will urge their leadership to take up this bill and pass it this session.

LH: Yeah, that's great. I think it's one of those issues if you don't necessarily spend a lot of time at the state house. It seems a little, I don't know, just something you wouldn't even think about. But as someone who also has tried to recruit people to run and support people, it's such a hard thing to ask of people and so many people can't do it right now. So I think it's so important to make sure that our legislature is better reflecting all kinds of Vermonters. So I think it's exciting and I'm glad you all took it up and grateful for it. So thank you so much. Good luck in these final weeks of the session with these and all of your priorities and take care.

RH: Yeah, thank you so much for having me, Lauren. Nice to chat.

LH: And next, Justin will be talking with Representative Emma Mulvaney-Stanak

MAIN INTERVIEW

JUSTIN MARSH: Representative Emma Mulvaney Stanak is a Progressive representing Burlington. She is the House Progressive Party's caucus leader, which consists of four other House members, Representative Taylor Small, Representative Brian Cina, Representative Kate Logan, and Representative Troy Headrick. She was elected in 2020 after defeating the Democratic incumbent, Jean O'Sullivan, in the primary. She is a former Burlington City Council member, former chair of the Vermont Progressive Party, and daughter of Ed Stanak, a retired Act 250 District Coordinator and former candidate for Attorney General. Rep Mulvaney-Stanak has previously led the Vermont Livable Wage Campaign, is a member of the Rainbow Caucus, a mother of two younger children, and a wife. She's taking time from her weekend, fittingly, to discuss the challenges of serving in the State House, but also the policies she and her party are advocating for addressing legislative pay. Thank you for joining me, Representative Mulvaney-Stanak.

EMMA MULVANEY-STANAK: Thanks for having me, Justin. I'm excited for this conversation.

JM: Yeah, so first things first, I think the fact that we are recording this on a Saturday morning is not only a testament to the wild schedule of legislators, but the fact that being a public servant is often a role that doesn't come with set hours. And when the session adjourns, your constituents still expect to have their elected officials respond to their queries, attend events, and be a community presence. So tell me a little bit about the legislative policy, legislative pay policy that you and others are advocating for.

EMS: Well, it's a great question to start on. And if my wife listens to this podcast, big thank you for letting me do this recording on a Saturday morning after we both have really long work weeks. Because my wife actually has a really big job as well. And this is a good segue into this conversation around legislator compensation. Because it's really difficult to serve in the Vermont legislature. And it has been so for decades for people who don't come with economic privilege and have the ability in their regular lives, if you will, to do things that are, quote, hobby jobs, if you will. And so part of why it's so important that the legislature compensation conversation go forward and S39 specifically is that it's about damn time. I like to quote Lizzo often in my work. And actually, when I testified on this very bill and Senate government operations, I quoted Lizzo. I didn't say her full actual accurate quote, but it's really about modernizing our Vermont legislative system. And when people talk about wanting to diversify the body of the house or the Senate to make sure that there are more women, that there are more queer folks, that there are more BIPOC folks, et cetera, they often jump over the actual biggest elephant in the room, the biggest barrier for folks, which is economic livelihood and economic security. And that looks like having a job that pays you a livable wage. It looks like having a job that offers health insurance, pensions, adequate compensation, so you're able to have a life. that includes having children or being able to leave your home for multiple days in a row, which there's other expenses that come along with that for folks. And so the system we have now is really antiquated. We get paid roughly \$14,000 for a salary. There's a wild assumption that the job just magically ends outside of Tuesday through Friday, January to May, which is completely false. And it also looks over the fact that in this more complex world that we're living in where policy issues. are so complicated, are so emergent, so like on an emergency level of crisis on so many levels that it takes much deeper complicated thinking to put together policy. And the only time you really can develop adequate policy is off session, where you get to meet with constituents, when you get to meet with advocates on the national level, and you meaning the legislator, because we have no staff. We don't have staff who's helping us with research or outreach or responding to constituents. And we represent thousands of people. any of our districts, whether you're in the House or the Senate. So it's a really massively big job. And most other states do it very differently in terms of compensation. Vermont is in the bottom 10 of states in terms of our total compensation overall. And it is, we've been coasting on this this kind of privileged legislature setup, which is, which really is a disservice to Vermonters because we don't see the average face of Vermonters in that building. And that impacts quality of decisions that are made, it impacts gets prioritized. And that's why we've seen no real meaningful action on paid family leave, on labor issues related to working people, and related to health care. I mean, honestly, if we had a very different body and legislative compensation is a huge component, it's a huge foundational block in making sure that we have a legislature that is responsive to what Vermonters are asking us to do.

JM: Yeah, and so what would the policy include? So it's an incremental increase, correct, so that it's not directly impacting the present-day lawmakers. It's kind of tiered, if I'm understanding correctly.

EMS: Correct. There are a few components of it. And if folks really want to dive into the details, so S39 started as a much stronger bill in Senate government operations. And I had a companion bill, H281, which actually Senate government operations took some elements of as we started to look at, actually, ironically enough, the pretty small amount of increase it would be compared to when you look at the executive branch and the judicial branch and how much we spend for the staffing and the elected people on those two branches of government. We are dwarfed. And so they actually realized they could be a little bit more, a little tiny bit more generous in the salary compensation and reimbursements for people with child, children, when they looked at the fiscal analysis of that bill. So if people want to go back, I think that's important because what ultimately passed out of the Senate after Senate appropriations took a look at the bill is less, it's less than where it started. And so in a nutshell, the bill S39, as it got passed by the Senate and is now in the House, offers all members of the General Assembly eligibility for the state health insurance plan, which is the same one for state employees and the cost sharing would be the same. That would actually be available within the first year of this bill being enacted. But again, I want to emphasize that you would elect to be part of the insurance and you pay something for it. It's not 100% premium coverage or anything like that. The biggest piece is really around the compensation of salary, and that is phased in so that no current legislator would see an increase in their salary unless they got re-elected. Because the first salary increase would start in 2025. And then the Senate Appropriations thought, rather than what Senate government operations offered, they thought that it should be phased in over two bienniums, which I disagree with. However, that's the way it got passed. Senate government operations wanted a phase in that started next biennium. But the Senate Appropriations felt that a more gradual increase, of a very minimal salary increase, should be... way we go. So you, so legislators won't have the full salary implementation of going up to about \$28,000 for the year until 2027, which is two election cycles away. There's also a little bit in there around a legislator compensation off cycle, meaning when the session ends, about a fifth, the equivalent would be a fifth of the salary. So basically one day of work a week. For off-session work to help compensate people for those things I mentioned before. It's when we do all of our research, we still talk to constituents, everybody and their mother asks you to go to events pretty much every day of the week. It could really easily be a full-time job, but this proposal still starts us a good step forward of acknowledging what people need in order to do this job well.

JM: Yeah, you said one day, it's equivalent to one day a week of work on the off session is what you'll receive for the proposed compensation. But would you say that that's accurate to the actual amount of work that you currently do in the off session?

EMS: Because I'm a dork, I actually tracked my hours off session, just to see. I'm self-employed outside of the legislature anyway, so I track hours for my client work. And so I really thought, because it felt like a lot, and I was feeling, especially as I got into September, October into

December leading up to the session, I just felt like I was really starting to juggle and having to really create some boundaries around my legislative work, because it was all unpaid, and yet people wanted to meet. I needed time to, as I said, do a lot of policy development. Even one bill, if you do it well and really think it through, it takes a number of hours to really put together and work with legislative council. And this is all work that I want to emphasize that is best done outside the session because once you hit January, you're deep into your committee work. You have many more things pulling on your time availability. So to do it well, you really have to do the stuff off session. It's actually presented that tracking the data that I track with my hours to the Senate Government Operations Committee because I'm a dork again. with bar graphs and everything. And I compared my first biennium compared to, sorry, I guess it would be 2022. The pandemic has blurred my brain with years. So it would have been 2021 and 2022, like the off session of those two for my first term. And I had no boundaries around it because it was the height of the pandemic. And I didn't know what, you know, I worked all the time because many people who have small children got into that phase, frankly, around. I'll just tag team and I'll sleep less and we'll just make it work. And there are no boundaries to when I stop working and start working. When I looked at my hours, even when I tried to really curb back how much I was spending in the off session with work, uh, because I just needed the time to actually do my paid work with clients. It was shocking. I think on average I was spending 15, easily 15 hours a week when I was really trying not to work on legislative issues during the off sessions. So even this one fifth a week piece, which would be roughly what, eight hours a week, is pretty minimal. And it assumes that you're also not addressing constituents on the fly or going to events. None of that really, I think, is adequately accounted for that because when I estimated my 15 hours a week, that was really policy work that I was tracking.

JM: One thing that I'm curious of is where this policy is. My understanding is that there's maybe unspoken. sense that this needs to happen soon and not in an election year. Is that the feeling?

EMS: Well, it is a little tricky because the Senate, we expected the Senate to have passed this before crossover and crossovers, many of your listeners will know, are these deadlines that the Senate and House agreed to pass policy bills by so the other chamber basically has time to act upon it before the end of the session. It's not impossible, though, for policy to still find a path forward once that deadline has gone. But S39 came several weeks after that crossover deadline, which makes it much harder than frankly I think it needed to be. And it puts the House in an awkward position of trying to find a path forward. So we could, the speaker could basically still put it on the calendar, regardless of the crossover deadlines as bill S39, or we could find another bill to attach it to, to make, to find a path forward. I think the biggest piece around anything is that, you know, the legislature makes the rules and we can find a path forward because fundamentally what this bill is about is legislating. adequate and fair compensation for future legislators, not current legislators. This is all about who do we want in this body going forward? And we as policymakers, this is a critical part of what I was talking about before, making sure we have a really reflective democracy of people who live in Vermont. And so to me, that's the obligation. So we must find a path forward. And when you throw politics in, yeah, when it's a campaign season. which unfortunately is every other year in Vermont, we should talk about the length of terms because it's this two-year cycle that everybody's on just means we're pumping

way too much money into election cycles that I feel are really unnecessary. If we extended the terms just even ever so slightly, we could do better quality work and people could be more focused on policy than constantly campaigning. But that's a conversation for another podcast. But in a campaign cycle year, people are more visibly out engaging with constituents. And I think some of us are ready to have that conversation. As a woman in particular, and as a queer person with all the gender pay gaps and the queer pay gap and all of that, I'm ready to have that conversation. I've never had a problem asking for what I deserve and what I fairly should earn, because this to me is part of the larger conversation around fair economics and making sure people have fair pay for what they're doing. And as we elect more women and queer people and BIPOC people to this body, we're going to contribute to the gender and racial wage gaps if we don't start addressing these issues. So to me, I'm boldly inviting that conversation. I don't think this is something that legislators should shy away from, be it a campaign year or not, but not everyone shares that opinion. So many people feel politically it's going to be harder for folks who might be in more, um, purple districts, or perhaps are just more timid about talking about economics, um, which sadly women have been culturally really, uh, unfortunately raised around, um, that's going to be a harder conversation for some people. But my hope is that we help embolden those folks. We help create a larger dialogue in the state so people know the significance of it all and the importance of legislating this policy for future legislators.

JM: You mentioned your wife at the top of the interview. If you were a single parent, do you think that you'd still have the capacity to serve?

EMS: Hell no to the no to the no to the no. I would not be able to do this. Absolutely not. I've actually thought like in the darkness of the pandemic, I don't know if any married person didn't think about is this marriage gonna survive? I love you, Megan, just for the record. But in these dark moments, you think like, how could I even, frankly, the legislator role aside, affording to live in Vermont as a single person is so difficult with the cost of living and everything else. But I would definitely not be able to be a legislator between the pay and lack of access to health insurance. As a self-employed person, there'd be no way that I'd be able to do this job without my wife having a good public sector job, works with city of Burlington with solid health insurance. There's absolutely no way I could do this, especially as a parent of two small children. It would feel like an irresponsible choice, to be honest, because I'm not sure how I would support my kids with adequate health insurance, and however, that would be split if I were single, as a single parent.

JM: Okay. Thank you so much for sharing that. And I want to pivot now to more broadly what some of the progressive party priorities that you've put forth this year. What looks poised to make it over the finish line, and what will continue when the session resumes next January?

EMS: I'd love to talk about that because the Progressive Caucus started the biennium with a legislative priority list, if you will, for the two-year cycle, because we do have two years to technically get these bills across the finish line. And of course, a big question mark is always at the end of the process with our governor, who has a record number of vetoes and what he's going to plan to do with those is to be seen on any of these number of issues. But... So the

progressives really, we've always been a party around economic justice and economic dignity. So that is one of our core areas. We have been watching a couple of issues that fall under that around housing policy and worker policies, so working families in particular. And so we've been watching the paid family leave bill and very curious, we were proud to be one of a hundred plus sponsors at the end of H66, which was the house version of paid family leave bill. I'll go over to the Senate, but that will really, that piece will. I think unfortunately is headed towards a collision course with child care given what the Senate has set up. And so that is a really unfortunate example, I think, of how especially working people's issues get forced into this zero sum policymaking framework where we can only do one thing. We can't walk and chew gum at the same time. And we play right into this false narrative that the governor set up around affordability when in reality working people have been holding the expense. of navigating childcare and paid family leave or lack thereof for years. And so somebody is bearing the brunt of this cost right now and it is working people of Vermont. And so unfortunately with this framing, what gets lost in the shuffle is that if we can do these bold pieces of policies, this will actually balance out the economics of what working people are solely bearing the brunt of right now. And so that's why progressives are so committed to making sure that a robust and fully... and vibrant childcare policy and pay family leave get across the finish line because they're important Intersectional policies in our mind. The second piece on economic dignity is that we really want to see meaningful labor bills pass There really hasn't been action on labor bills in at least a handful of years in the legislature and so what that looks like are things like the Coined the the labor bill the pro-act which stands for protecting the right to organize which is a mimic a mimicking of a federal bill but there's some important components in there to make the organizing process for unions easier for Vermonters who are in public sector jobs. It also includes a very important piece of banning what's called captive audience meetings, which in these political times, usually these are meetings required by the employer for their employees to attend. And if you don't attend, you can get reprimanded or in this case at an at will say you could get even fired for refusing to attend these meetings. They've in the past been used to basically bash unions if groups of workers are trying to organize a union at that workplace. But they've now been started to be used for political reasons, for religious reasons, to just pontificate as the employer about whatever their beliefs are. And employees have to sit there and just receive it, regardless of free speech. So this is an important and I think very timely component of the PRO Act. And the final piece that made it across from the Senate was around allowing agriculture and domestic workers the right to organize, which we can do under state law. silent under federal law. And these folks are some of the lowest paid and most exploited workers in our economy. So that's just one bill, one example. There's a few other labor bills, but we really would like to see something meaningful put forward about workers' rights, either minimum wage or issues related to just workplace justice. On a good, on a positive note, and it hasn't passed yet, so I don't want to jinx it in any kind of way, but S103. is a bill that does address issues of workplace discrimination and housing discrimination for that matter and harassment. And so there's some really strong important language in there. And they also included updating the equal pay portion of our state statute. And that is a bill that we, as the progressives, we've also been supporting a version of this around expanding the protected categories for that someone could place an equal pay claim under. Right now it's just sex. It hadn't been touched for 20 years. And sex, of course, is based on the gender binary and is an

antiquated way of looking at, even just if you're looking at gender identity of what comes up in workplaces and the justifications that employers can use to pay someone differently, right? And so, I mean, we're excited about S103 because it added racial identity, it added national origin. And until just last week, until progressives intervened, frankly, it did not include gender identity or sexual orientation. And so we pushed back while in committee and the bill got better and those added categories were added, which again is so important in this climate where there's so much transphobia and homophobia and just literally systematic efforts to not only erase people who hold those identities, but treat them as other and differently. And so this is a good bold move in Vermont and I'm hoping it passes the finish line by the end of the session. So S103 could at least be a good piece of labor bill.

JM: Yeah, well, the finish line is near, hopefully, right? I feel like it's been quite the marathon. And just in closing, I asked a similar question when I interviewed Representative Sadia Lamont several episodes back. What advice would you have for someone with your shared identities if they're considering running for office?

EMS: Well, I am always trying to find a path to help someone say yes to it. But I'm also very realistic about the barriers that are still there to make the, as I've talked earlier around the economics work, but we haven't even talked in this conversation yet around the other realities around sexism, homophobia, racism. They all exist because our state legislature is simply just an extension of the culture and the communities that we're coming from, right? And a lot of that has been not adequately addressed quite yet in the legislature. And so we're really, some of us, just by our mere presence, are disrupting that reality. I serve on House Commerce and Economic Development, which is a committee you would not imagine that a lot of issues of equity or identity, et cetera, come up. But frankly, when you look at any piece of bill that we're talking about, it comes up all the time. If you're actually looking at it from the lens of who is being left out, what is... gender binary language is being used, what is race's language being used, where are we not even intentionally addressing the marginalization of people with certain identities and how we can use this piece of policy to leverage and make it better. And so I've actually been quite surprised how frequently it comes up even in my committee and just the mere presence of at least me being there as a queer woman voicing these things and trying to be an ally also of course for the BIPOC community and other folks whose identities I don't share. Even my mere presence has been able to change policy. And there's so many examples of it, of just using respectful language, updating provisions of law that might feel really minor, but right now, technically create a separate, but equal kind of construct or just, frankly, no access to a particular benefit because of the way that that old state statute law is written. So it really matters to get people in. in not only in the room, but in the seats that make the decisions. And we need to do better to support folks so they're able that we're able to stay in these positions because it is a brutal. It's a brutal time to be elected leader anywhere. There are a lot of attacks and we can't sugarcoat it either. And we can't. But we also can't set people up, help them in their campaigns and say, you're elected. Yay. High fives all around and then disappear on them, because that actually creates the most hostile and harmful environment for people. where then folks get harmed, they're there by themselves. As I mentioned before, we have no staff, there is no buffer and we're in it on our own. And so creating community is critically important and

creating active allies. And I use that word very specifically, active allies, rather than passive allies, because Vermont has this fake progressive bubble around it, small p, where everyone thinks because we're not Texas and we don't have these awful laws that are actually advancing in any way, shape or form in Vermont, that we are somehow immune or from these acts of homophobia or racism, etc. And we're absolutely that's not the case. So active allyship means speaking up when a transphobic bill gets introduced, which did happen here in Vermont, H513. Trigger warning, don't go read it. It's but just know it's transphobic. And we need people though to stand up and say so and be a visible voice and an active voice so that folks who hold those identities don't have to constantly be the ones. raising the alarm or speaking that there's harm being done, et cetera. So that is the next frontier for the Vermont legislature to make sure that we have more active allies and we're making room and protecting the space for people with marginalized identities or intersectional identities as well, which makes that job even harder.

JM: So you would say yes, but with a big asterisk.

EMS: Yeah, was that asterisk big enough? Because that was probably like a 20 minute rant about like, yes, and this is all the ways we have to do better to support you so that you know what you're walking into at the same time.

JM: Yeah, I mean, I'm a realist, I get it. And I appreciate that. I'm glad that you're there, though. So thank you for doing it.

EMS: And I think the other thing that people need to realize is that a lot of folks, you're still going to be the first or maybe second person to hold that identity in this state, which is not only a big celebratory big fucking deal, frankly, but it's also a big scary deal in the times that we're living in, when it is so easy to find people, isolate them, attack them, etc. And that's again why I think it's so important to underscore the role of allyship. And so we need everyone in that building who believes that yes, it is an important thing to have queer people and trans folks and black folks, et cetera, serve. So what does that mean? Like what's your role to make sure that they stay safe and that they can be here to do this job and do it well.

JM: Yeah, absolutely. Well, thank you so much for your work and your advocacy and of course, for taking the time to talk to VCV and our listeners. And I hope you are able to enjoy the rest of your weekend and you don't have to do too much more work.

EMS: Oh, well, that's a lie. Yes, it's the last two weeks of the session. So there'll be a whole lot of legislative work, but it's more like I'm looking forward to the end of May because then it'll be a little bit better. But Justin, thank you so much for having me. I really appreciate the invitation.

JM: Yeah, take care.

EMS: Thank you. Thanks.

STAT OF THE WEEK & OUTRO

Now it's time for our Stat of the Week. 11. That is the number of renters among the entire Vermont General Assembly. Of those 11, three are members of the Progressive Caucus. Meanwhile, 35 members are or have been landlords, property managers, or realtors, including a third of the Senate body which includes just 2 renters. This is thanks to recent data analysis by Vermont Digger.

I want to thank our guests Representative Emma Mulvaney-Stanak, Senator Ruth Hardy, and of course Lauren Hierl for assisting me.

If you enjoy this podcast, please subscribe and give us a rating wherever you listen to your podcasts. Be sure to follow us on social media. On Twitter, we are @VoteGreenVT, YouTube and Instagram @VTConservationVoters, and find us on Facebook as well. You can subscribe to our emails, see our legislative environmental scorecard, and learn more about our work and policies by visiting vermontconservationvoters.org. Have an idea for a story or want to provide feedback? Email me at jmarsh@vermontconservationvoters.org.

We will be back next week with an episode live from the 2023 Annual Conservation Voters Conference in Minnesota. Until then, thanks for listening.