



Founded in 1974, the Vermont Coalition for Disability Rights (VCDR) is comprised of 24-member organizations including local and statewide organizations of Vermonters with disabilities, parents, advocates and service providers.

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VCDR Calls on UVMHC and DHMC to Ensure Safe Healthcare Access for All

Montpelier, VT- The Vermont Coalition for Disability Rights is calling for safe access to healthcare for Vermonters with disabilities. UVM Medical Center and Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center both announced this week that they are dropping COVID protections including universal masking, and it is anticipated that additional medical facilities will soon follow.

“There is no room for ableism in healthcare ever, and especially not during the midst of an ongoing pandemic”, said Sarah Launderville, President of the Vermont Coalition for Disability Rights. “Institutions that choose to actively perpetuate harm to people with disabilities cannot claim a commitment to health equity, or that they value ending health disparities.”

In June of 2021 Governor Phil Scott rescinded all COVID public health protections, leaving individual medical facilities to set their own policies, [proclaiming](#) Vermont to be “the envy of the nation, the safest state in the United States and a global leader.”

“But that wasn’t true for Vermonters with disabilities then, and it isn’t true now”, said Launderville.

Vermont went on to experience unprecedented surges of cases, deaths, and outbreaks in congregate care settings of [the most vulnerable](#), with the number of deaths and hospitalizations nearly tripling after protections were removed. Additionally, thousands went on to develop long COVID and Vermont ranks as the [sixth worst state](#) in the nation for highest percentage of the population having reported ongoing symptoms.

“Vermont’s commitment to health equity can’t be taken seriously and is nothing more than lip service if health care facilities are allowed to abandon masking policies that effectively deny equal access to health care for individuals who are vulnerable to infectious diseases such as Covid-19”, said Wilda White, founder of MadFreedom. “Health Equity exists when all people have a fair and just opportunity to be healthy, especially those who have experienced socioeconomic disadvantage, historical injustice, and other avoidable systemic inequalities that are often associated with social categories of race, gender, ethnicity, social position, sexual orientation and disability.”

COVID Safe Campus, a nationwide group of disabled academics and public health policy experts, noted that many academic medical centers outside of our region still require masks. “It is unacceptable for any healthcare setting to prioritize ‘healthy individuals’ and give up on protecting disabled and high-risk patients by removing this essential safety measure. To remove mask requirements in healthcare settings is to accept death and disease rather than treat or prevent it”, said Eiryn Griest Schwartzman, Executive Director. “Without safe medical care, the most marginalized and vulnerable patients are left to die.”

“Regardless of universal policies related to COVID protections, people with disabilities have federally protected civil rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act to ensure equal access to services and places of public accommodation—including healthcare—without incurring a greater risk of harm”, said

“Nothing about us, without us.”

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Kate Larose, Pandemic Equity Coordinator with the Vermont Center for Independent Living.

VCDR member organization Vermont Center for Independent Living will host a free webinar on Monday, April 10th to inform Vermonters with disabilities of their rights under the ADA. More information and a link to register are [available here](#).

“True measure of equitable public health ought not be when those of us who are least vulnerable are healthy and safe but must be when those of us who are most vulnerable are cared for and protected”, said Reverend Mark Hughes Executive Director of Racial Justice Alliance and Chair Health Equity Advisory Commission.

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KEY FACTS AND REFERENCES

- [Nowhere is safe: Record number of patients contracted Covid in the hospital in January - POLITICO](#)
- [Hiding in Plain Sight: Public Health, Eugenics, and COVID-19 - HPHR Journal](#)
- [Ever-changing but always constant: “Waves” of disability discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States – Disability and Health Journal](#)
- [COVID-19 Was Leading Killer Of People With Developmental Disabilities, Disability Scoop, September 2022](#)
- [The Devastating Impact of Covid-19 on Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities in the United States, NEJM, March 2021](#)
- [Long-COVID in people with intellectual disabilities: A call for research of a neglected area, BJLD, August 2022](#)
- [Persistent Disparities in COVID-19 Antiviral Dispensing | Clinical Pharmacy and Pharmacology | JAMA | JAMA Network, July 2022](#)
- [Neutralization against BA.2.75.2, BQ.1.1, and XBB from mRNA Bivalent Booster | NEJM](#)
- [Without Evusheld, Immunocompromised People Are on Their Own Against COVID-19 \(yahoo.com\)](#)
- [‘Kraken’ COVID variant XBB.1.5 could spawn even more immune-evasive variants, new study says | Fortune Well](#)
- [COVID variant XBB.1.16, dubbed “Arcturus”: What to know | Fortune Well](#)
- [CDC COVID Data Tracker: Community Transmission Rates Risk View](#)

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