The 2016 legislative session was a successful one for VBSR: Our four-year campaign to pass a bill expanding paid leave policies across the state concluded successfully, and we played the lead role in expanding employment opportunities for Vermonters with criminal convictions. VBSR also tackled several environmental and energy issues in this second-half of the biennium, including bringing members to the State House to discuss the benefits of putting a price on carbon pollution and working with the Legislature to divest state funds from fossil fuel companies (that one is still a work in progress – see below). On Earth Day, VBSR worked with our Energy Independent Vermont coalition to bring more than 100 business leaders and employees of socially responsible companies to the State House for an energy training and lobbying day. Participation from VBSR members is essential to passing good policy at the State House and we appreciate all our members who helped make 2016 a great year for progress in Vermont.

**ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

**H.187 - Earned Paid Leave**

VBSR believes that all Vermonters deserve access to paid time off – and this bill, first voted on in 2015 by the House and approved by the Senate in 2016, establishes a minimum standard of earned time off for employees working more than an average of 18 hours a week. The bill is phased in over a number of years and includes provisions such as a one-year waiting period for new hires and emerging businesses. Nearly 60,000 Vermonters lack access to any paid time off right now and this bill, when enacted in 2017, will bring this benefit to many of them. VBSR members instrumental to this campaign included Chroma Technology, The Alchemist, Marketing Partners, and Main Street Landing.

**H.261 - Ban the Box**

This bill removes the criminal history question from most private sector job applications in Vermont while also retaining an employer’s right to conduct background checks and to ask about convictions during job interviews. VBSR believes this bill matches modern hiring processes and allows Vermonters with criminal convictions the opportunity to tell their story in an interview and explain to a prospective employer what skills and qualifications they bring to a position. States and cities that have passed similar legislation have seen increased participation in the workforce from ex-offenders and reduced rates of recidivism. VBSR members who testified in support of the bill at the State House were NorthLand Design & Construction, WrightJones PLC, and Ben & Jerry’s Ice Cream.

**ENERGY AND THE ENVIRONMENT**

**H.412/H.395 - Carbon Pollution Tax**

Addressing global warming is good for Vermont’s economy. Over 17,000 Vermonters work in the clean energy sector, but without further action to combat climate change, the worst impacts of global warming will become unavoidable. VBSR believes tax reform, including putting an appropriate price on carbon pollution, can make a difference. Revenue from a carbon pollution tax could allow Vermont to make dramatic reductions in taxes on the kinds of economic development we want more of, such as personal income and sales taxes. VBSR members Seventh Generation, Black River Produce, Danforth Pewter, and Capstone Community Action testified in favor of this proposal before a legislative committee in 2016, although lawmakers did not vote on a bill. We expect this to be a top issue at the State House in 2017.

**Low-Income Weatherization**

Investing in energy efficiency and weatherization programs to help low-income Vermonters reduce their fuel usage is not only good for the environment, but it also creates and sustains thousands of well-paying and local jobs. VBSR joined several other organizations this year in calling for a small increase in the state’s Gross Receipts Tax, a fee placed on liquid fossil fuels in Vermont. This was the first increase in several decades and will help boost funding for programs that have seen declining investment in recent years. The changes made this year will raise an additional $2.5 million for low-income weatherization programs and help reduce a long waiting list of applications.

**Executive Order No. 05-16 - Green State Contracting**

This executive order signed by Gov. Shumlin puts in place green incentives for companies bidding on state contracts. The order, signed by Shumlin early this summer after the legislative session ended, was a longtime goal of VBSR. Companies that use clean energy, have energy efficient buildings or business practices, or have divested from fossil fuel stocks will receive preference when bidding for state contracts. VBSR believes that our tax dollars should not pay companies that aren’t doing their part to keep our state green – and that this is an added incentive for companies to clean up their practices. The executive order was signed outside the South Burlington retail location of VBSR member Small Dog Electronics.

**HR-13 - Fossil Fuel Divestment**

This non-binding resolution from the Vermont House called for the state to fully divestment it’s pension funds from all coal and Exxon-Mobil holdings. VBSR believes the state should not invest Vermont’s money in companies that are damaging the environment and contributed greatly to global warming. Vermont State Treasurer Beth Pearce has since launched a study of divestment via the Vermont Public Investment Committee and a report later in 2016 should indicate whether or not the State decides to cease investing in fossil fuel stocks. The Senate did not pass a resolution, but a majority of that chamber did sign a letter with similar language as the House resolution. VBSR members who worked on this campaign were Ben & Jerry’s Ice Cream, Seventh Generation, and Clean Yield Asset Management.

**HEALTH CARE**

**Health Care Reform**

Anyone looking for large-scale reforms in our broken health care system in 2016 was surely disappointed as lawmakers struggled to find a path forward after Gov. Shumlin abandoned his push for a universal and publicly funded health care system. Lawmakers did try to tackle the much-maligned Vermont Health Connect, funding a study to consider options if problems persist there. We expect to continue advocating for efforts that expand access to health care, reduce waste and overall costs, and decouples insurance from employment. VBSR believes that the best way to move forward is by creating a Universal Primary Care system in Vermont – guaranteeing every resident access to a family doctor.

*VBSR’s State House advocacy work is directed through the organization’s Public Policy Committee. For more information on our lobbying work, please contact VBSR Public Policy Manager Daniel Barlow at (802) 355-7461 or* *danielb@vbsr.org**.*