

2024 State of the Union Essay Contest Winning Essays



U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders

Winner

Leah Frisbie (Essex High School, Junior)

Banned Books

Second Place

Abigail Curry (Mount Mansfield Union High School, Junior)

Indigenous Water Rights

Third Place

Leah Fitzgerald (Bellows Free Academy – Saint Albans, Senior)

Homelessness

Finalists

(in alphabetical order)

Liliana Dicks (Oxbow High School, Junior)

Patterson Frazier (Champlain Valley Union High School, Junior)

Jack French (Essex High School, Junior)

Talia Gibbs (Vermont Commons School, Senior)

Delia Gould (Brattleboro Union High School, Freshman)

Olivia Gray (South Burlington High School, Freshman)

Maddy McHale (Burlington High School, Freshman)

Andres Miguez (Mount Mansfield Union High School, Junior)

Oliver Nichols (Burlington High School, Freshman)

Thomas Scheetz (Mount Anthony Union High School, Senior)

Magdelina Short (Bellows Free Academy – Fairfax, Sophomore)

Jackson Wheaton (Northfield Middle & High School, Freshman)

Winner
Leah Frisbie (Essex High School, Junior)

Books are foundational to our society, as self-discovery is enhanced through reading about different characters, cultures, and perspectives and finding similarities within it all. Books have the power to transform lives, tell important stories, and spread information. As each year more and more books are pulled from library shelves, the opportunities provided are reduced. The banning of books in the United States is a pressing problem that deprives people across the country from perspectives, information, and freedom.

In recent years, the removal of books from school libraries has exponentially increased in the United States. According to The New York Times, "The PEN report, which counted book removals in school and classroom libraries during the 2022-2023 school year, found 3,362 cases of books being removed, a 33 percent increase over the previous school year." The majority of banned books target topics relating to gender identity, racial justice, and sexuality. Through attempts to ban books, marginalized groups' stories and perspectives are silenced. The act of banning books diminishes the quality and purpose of education. With the absence of diverse stories shared, the population becomes less educated, and marginalized groups will continue to be underrepresented. When students aren't exposed to diverse stories, ignorance, hate, and fear rise.

The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas is a book that tells the true story of a young girl facing racism and its correlation to police brutality in the US. Although it is a heavy topic, it accurately addresses the reality and problems of our society. It communicates someone's life experiences, yet is widely banned in school libraries due to its portrayal of racism and anti-police views. The Hate U Give is a single example out of thousands of books, where underrepresented groups' stories, history, and truth is restricted from the public.

In order to stop the escalation of banned books, Congress must pass the Fight Banned Books Act that was introduced in December of 2023. The act provides funding to school districts to fight against the banned book crisis. Currently, many schools do not have the budget to defend banned books, resulting in a surge of books being pulled from shelves. With the act, The Department of Education would dedicate \$15 million over five years to school districts to help assist in the costs, including retaining legal representation, travel to hearings on bans, and maintaining expert research. By passing the Fight Banned Books Act, school districts across the nation would play a fundamental role in decreasing banned books and spreading awareness.

Congress must pass the Fight Banned Books Act in order to protect the nation from the needless deprivation of information. The issues occurring in society, such as gender and race inequalities, deserve to be shared in libraries. While the intention of removing books from shelves is to protect students, it is doing the complete opposite: Students' education, freedom, and exposure to different perspectives is deprived.

Second Place

Abigail Curry (Mount Mansfield Union High School, Junior)

In the Mojave desert, along the Colorado River, there lives a tribe of indigenous Americans who call themselves the Aha Makav. Translated as best as possible into English, this name means "The river runs through the middle of my body." The Aha Makav are one of 30 tribes living in the Colorado River Basin, where the river has all but dried up and the water crisis has reached catastrophic levels. But they're not the only ones struggling to find water. Research by the House Committee on Natural Resources showed that 48% of Native Americans living on reservations in the U.S. don't have a reliable source of clean, drinkable water—a proportion 80x higher than the 0.6% of all Americans who don't have access to drinking water.

Part of the issue's cause is that when Native Americans were assigned reservation land, much of what they received was dry, barren land in the West that were predisposed to drought. They have also been repeatedly left out of infrastructure and utility development projects that would have brought them running water, leaving hundreds of thousands to haul water by the bucket. So far, the government has refused any obligation to improve the issue. This past June, the Supreme Court ruled in *Arizona v. Navajo Nation* that even if Indigenous tribes have treaty rights to a river's water, the government doesn't have any obligation to assess how much of it they have a right to, or to help them actually access it.

The indigenous water crisis is a complicated issue that will only get harder to solve as climate change continues to worsen droughts in the U.S. That being said, there is a path to a solution. First, the Supreme Court must overturn their decision in *Arizona v. Navajo Nation*. This ruling was a significant step backwards for native water rights, but it was only a 5-4 majority. If the decision is revisited, it's very possible for it to reverse. This will remove the new roadblock in the way of indigenous water access, and open an opportunity for the U.S. to make reparations and improve water access for Native Americans.

Once the road forward is clear, proactive steps must be taken to ensure that Native Americans can access the water they have a right to. The court must first quantify how much water native tribes have a right to, and therefore how river and ground water will be distributed among tribes and other consumers. Once this is quantified, the government must increase funding for water infrastructure projects on reservations. This funding will allow tribes to access river and ground water, as well as opening treatment plants to create their own potable water.

As the water crisis in the U.S. worsens and Native Americans become more vulnerable to its effects, it is imperative that the U.S. begins to remedy the centuries of harm done to Native Americans by taking action to ensure their access to clean, safe water.

Third Place

Leah Fitzgerald (Bellows Free Academy – Saint Albans, Senior)

The 2023 Point in Time (PIT) count conducted by the U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) revealed the disheartening truth that over 653,104 American citizens were experiencing homelessness on a single night in January of last year. 40% of such individuals were reported as unsheltered, meaning "living" in a place not intended for human habitation. 41 U.S. states reported a significant surge of persons experiencing homelessness compared to years prior. The 2023 PIT count is the highest recorded count in HUD data, surpassing figures back from 2007. This data is not just a statistical representation: it narrates the lived experiences for thousands of Americans, and writes the story of negligence, ignorance and systematic tolerance for homeless Americans.

Interning at a local emergency housing shelter during high school allowed me to witness these numbers in real life. Distributing gloves, hats, blankets, and food could not overshadow the fact many would be sleeping outside in the cold Vermont weather without a roof over their heads. In my county, over 462 citizens, with 114 being children, were on record as having experienced homelessness in 2023.

Solving homelessness goes beyond than simply building more homes. Even with less restrictive building codes, or a substantial decrease in housing prices, these improvements would not exclusively benefit the homeless populations. With the average two-bedroom apartment being over 1700 dollars a month, the only reasonable option for low-income citizens is subsidized units. Despite the pre-existing welfare programs like PBRA, TBRA, and FRA that have been assisting low-income families for over 75 years, the HUD budget can only assist 1 in 4 eligible citizens with its current funding. Similarly, the Housing First model supported by the Biden-Harris administration struggles to become mainstream without adequate funding.

Providing housing is the first step to solving homelessness, but there is an entire staircase that is essential to breaking the continuous cycle of homelessness. Studies show that "wrap around" services are critical for citizens to remain in permanent housing, however such support is hard to find. With the entire nation understaffed, underfunded and overwhelmed the solution for solving homelessness is not quick nor short term.

First, support to the private and public housing sectors is essential to promoting housing. By expanding programs such as HOME, PRO Housing, or TBRA will encourage land use and support the housing market. New units can specifically be sectioned off for homeless populations under PBRA. Upon entering such housing, citizens need to be connected with behavioral, mental, medical and financial services funded by programs like SSA and HHS. Programs under the HUD should also be adequately funded through the national budget. HUD receives a little over 1% of the total budget, yet supports over 3 million families in housing assistance.

Short term solutions such as emergency housing vouchers or emergency rental assistance are not sustainable. As a nation, we must understand that in order to solve this ongoing issue, support from all angles is the only permanent solution to ending homelessness.

Finalists
(in alphabetical order)

Liliana Dicks (Oxbow High School, Junior)

Mental health is still a problem in America. Even in today's progressive society, mental health may be noticed, but is never truly acknowledged. Citizens are still feeling sad or hopeless, or even contemplating taking their own lives at such a young age. Bringing more awareness to our youth before they hit adulthood of how social media is affecting their mental health, and teaching them healthy habits of how to handle social media in their lives, would help with the impact of social media.

There is proof that the stories being told on social media of sad and despairing topics are contributing to the rise in suicide rates. According to the National Library of Medicine, "Hawton and colleagues (1999) conducted a study in emergency departments in the United Kingdom, examining the pattern of suicide attempts before and after a fictional Royal Air Force pilot took an overdose of paracetamol (i.e., acetaminophen) in an episode of a popular weekly TV drama. Presentations for self-poisoning increased by 17 percent in the week after the broadcast and 9 percent in the second week (Gould)." Another study taken place in Japan reported, "After 8 April 1986, an increase in the number of suicide cases was observed for four days among 10-14-year-old females ()." April 8th, 1986, was the date a popular singer committed suicide, and her death was broadcasted on social media. Both fictional and nonfictional stories are contributing factors to this rise in suicide rates. Meaning social media stories period have an effect on our mental health.

There is no getting rid of social media, but there is implementing safe habits. The American Psychological Association recommends teaching children social media literacy skills. These skills with teach children that social media is not real life, what is safe to share online, what too much social media use looks like, how to handle and prevent online conflicts, and to only find things about health both mental and physical, from credible physicians and doctors. I think these skills would be very important in helping children understand the impacts of social media, and how it affects them as a person.

Social media is deteriorating our citizen's mental health, but there is a solution. Implementing good and safe habits during youth and while people are being introduced to social media, will help protect them in the long run. Social media can be fun, but it can also be dangerous. It is important to teach and understand the lines we have to draw to keep our mental health safe.

Patterson Frazier (Champlain Valley Union High School, Junior)

One Vermonter every two days. One hundred and forty Americans every day. One hundred and fifteen thousand Americans a year. All of them have died. This is not a war, or a pandemic, or a car crash statistic. These are fatal drug overdoses, which since 1999 have increased by approximately 470%. For comparison, the U.S. Population has increased by 20% in that time. Drug crime has unequivocally worsened, and the entire country is paying the price. Cities are no longer safe, first responders are at critical risk of exposure-related overdose, and as of 2009 the United States was collectively spending half a trillion dollars a year on substance abuse management. Drug abuse has grown to a national crisis and needs to be swiftly curbed.

The issue of drugs is highly complex, and is a result of decades of poor public policy, corporate greed, and government interference. America should by every measure be more capable in solving drug crime than other nations who have successfully handled the issue. We are wealthy, with developed industries and capable medical professionals. So what are we doing differently? U.S. Policy has been historically focused on prosecuting and demonizing addicts. Newer approaches such as decriminalization are a step in the right moral direction, but often lack enough follow-up support and resources to be effective.

President Biden successfully increased the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration budget by three billion dollars for FY 2024, proving that money can be found to support national reform. The ideal national reform will supplement or overhaul the current substance abuse reduction policies. It needs to be built around the fact that addicts are victims of exploitation and should be shown compassion. In stark contrast, drug traffickers need to be prosecuted viciously.

The actions taken to help drug users need to be focused around a long-term vision for each individual. This requires state interdiction, which in turn needs justification. One place to start is to ban open air drug use, and fund the creation of safe injection sites nationwide. If a person is found using "Hard drugs" in a public place, then they should be considered for a mandatory rehabilitation program. After achieving sobriety, previous users need sources of stability. The federal government could create programs to match sober people with in-demand jobs. Safe injection sites will in turn help prevent open air drug use and clean up the streets.

Ultimately, there are no drugs without distribution and production. Law enforcement needs to receive increased funding with the specific goal of reducing the production of synthetic opiates. Rhode Island has been relatively successful in reducing drug use, in part due to stricter sentencing. The production of fentanyl results in prison sentences of up to fifty years and fines reaching 500,000 dollars. Strict and swift punishment can disrupt supply chains, while a combination of asset seizures and fines can help reimburse efforts. The facts are clear; drugs not only destabilize the country, but threaten our national security.

Jack French (Essex High School, Junior)

Per US Senate data, the first half of 2023 saw lobbyists spent a record 2.1 billion dollars at the federal level alone, coming most substantially from the pharmaceutical, insurance, and energy industries. With the 2024 election cycle fast approaching, this is far from the only corporate funding that will be funneled into government this year; ad spending by federal campaigns are expected to eclipse 15 billion dollars, and following the several landmark Supreme Court decisions, the source of this money has never been less transparent. The increasing role of private finance in policymaking and the legislative branch is one of the great challenges facing America today.

Private investment into political campaigns threatens the efficacy of the democratic process. Though it was once used to promote democracy, the lobbying system has become a form of legal bribery, in which money is exchanged for undue influence and policy is catered towards private interests. Lobbying funds elections, where the advent of mass media and invasive advertising techniques have created a situation wherein the victor is often the candidate with the most ad investment; in other words, a candidate's financiers play a greater role than their constituents do in keeping them in office. In a country that prides itself on its democratic ideals, the money of corporations and the fabulously rich should not vote louder and more directly than the voice of the people.

In order to protect the integrity of our democratic system, we must pursue both political and cultural change surrounding our regulation and perception of elections. First, the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act--a 2002 act responsible for regulating campaign finance that has been methodically gutted by pro-lobbying legislature and judicial decisions, most notably *Citizens United v. FEC* (2010)--needs to be supplemented with a wide-reaching piece of legislation, like Senator Warren's Anti-Corruption and Public Integrity Act, that will close loopholes and restrict financial actions of policymakers, both in the midst of elections and during their terms. This will keep our elected officials focused on the interests of their constituents as opposed to the highest donor.

Unfortunately, there's a reason that Senator Warren's proposal died in committee and campaign regulation comes under judicial threat. Those responsible for enacting such legislation are the same people that benefit from lobbying, and the same firms that lobby have the funding to challenge restrictions in the courts. In order to cause meaningful change, such an effort needs to come from the people. Funding plays less of a role in elections when the voting population is educated on the issues and has a high turnout, so participating in the democratic process will fortify the system from bad actors and wealthy individuals. In the long term, constituents need to advocate to their representatives in favor of tightening campaign restrictions, which will pressure legislative action. We cannot sit idly, watching our political representation be bought by big business; a government held accountable by the rich will not work for the people.

Talia Gibbs (Vermont Commons School, Senior)

I contracted COVID-19 in 2022, and my life has not been the same since. I went from dancing 16-20 hours a week to almost fainting when standing, full body pain, and struggling with stairs. I stopped dancing for some time. Later, a PT determined those were flare-ups of chronic illnesses caused by COVID-19, putting me in the long COVID group.

Long COVID is the persistence of symptoms for months after initial infection of SARS-CoV-2. Up to 23 million Americans suffer, and it has such detrimental medical and economic impacts that it is the next public health catastrophe and needs immediate intervention. It can manifest in a variety of forms, such as respiratory problems and Post-Exertional Malaise-when preexisting symptoms worsen up to forty-eight hours after activities. It can also trigger Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome-a chronic disorder involving dizziness, fatigue, increased heart rate, fainting, etc. All symptoms of long COVID severely affect everyday functioning.

Long COVID is not only affecting the health of Americans, but it is also impacting our economy. Long COVID prevents a dangerously large group of people from working; 71% of long COVID patients could not work for six or more months, and 18% were not back after a year-the majority were well below typical retirement age. Additionally, long COVID causes 170 - 230 billion dollars of annual lost wages, and it is estimated that the total economic cost of long COVID is \$3.7 trillion.

The first step towards helping the long COVID crisis is improving treatment and access to treatment, meaning we need more COVID clinics that provide personalized treatment and more funding, such as The National Research Action Plan on Long Covid, which involves Congress giving \$1.15 billion to the National Institutes of Health to research the illness. Income is another issue, which is why a reconsideration of paid sick leave is imperative. If people are worried about losing wages, they could go to work with COVID, increasing the number of long COVID patients. Additionally, current rules regarding paid sick leave are not sufficient for the timeline of long COVID. Solutions could be financial governmental intervention if working from home is not offered for certain jobs, or compensation if the workplace was where they contracted COVID-19, ultimately leading to long COVID.

Accommodations are an unquestionable necessity for approaching the long COVID disaster. On a smaller scale, they should include: choice between standing and sitting, working from home, and flexible hours. While long COVID is officially acknowledged as a disability, obtaining disability status with it is extremely difficult due to uncertain definitions and proof of illness. Additionally, the usual requirement for disability status is a minimum of one year, but long COVID is relatively new. We need to increase accessibility by acknowledging that this cannot follow normal rules, lowering the one-year limit, increasing coverage flexibility, and providing education about disability status and long COVID. Long COVID should be a national priority. Without this level of response, long COVID will continue to silently undermine society and destroy lives.

Delia Gould (Brattleboro Union High School, Freshman)

Why does the cycle of disadvantaged, low-income kids versus privileged kids continue into adulthood? All over the world there are inequalities in education, this applies to America and in our state of Vermont. The impact this has on students needs to be recognized. The more resources create more opportunities, resulting in more successful students. In Vermont and throughout the country, low income towns are unable to provide money for their students to get the education they deserve. In contrast to richer school districts where they do have the money to provide and ultimately create a better education and environment. This is the reason why many American public schools are unequal as a result of social class and resources available for students in school.

In Vermont this becomes evident when rural schools in lower income towns find it is much harder for students to get access to quality education. This affects the students because only those who have the motivation and support will be the ones to succeed, ultimately creating this inequality within the school system. According to the latest five-year ACS data statically West Brattleboro is the poorest part in all of Vermont with the typical household making 46 % less than the state average household income. These students are already starting off at a disadvantage and many with minimal support at home, in return it is the schools responsibility to make sure these students don't fall behind. This is why more funding for schools in these areas should be a priority. Moreover, the only way to break this cycle is creating schools with the resources students need to thrive and be successful. Alternatively, schools and districts with more funding are more easily able to achieve this, with less of the pressing issue of students in poverty. Another factor is more students in these schools and towns are easily able to seek support outside of school as well, as a result they will have the opportunity to better succeed. This creates a cycle where the privileged kids grow up to be privileged.

The way to equalize public school systems in America and within Vermont is to recognize the low-income towns and schools with this issue and make this a priority to help provide the resources needed for students through the schools. Along with this, students at these schools who do want to succeed often are not challenged to their full potential because the school cannot offer the same opportunities for them. Importantly, these schools need not only the bare minimum resources but also the opportunities that will set students up for success and a better chance at higher education. It is crucial to address this problem because the youth is our future and every kid deserves a quality education.

Olivia Gray (South Burlington High School, Freshman)

Has the government ever decided your future? 1970 is when Roe v Wade was brought to the Supreme Court, and 1973 was when it became legal to have an abortion. 2022 is when the law was overturned, and 2024 is now when women are again having to fight for rights to their bodies. Our nation has just undergone such a big setback in our history. The leaders of our "free" country shouldn't be able to determine what we do with our bodies, they need to make abortions safe and legal for every woman.

14 states have a full ban on abortions, 2 states have a ban after 6 weeks, 2 states have a ban after 12 weeks, and 3 states have a ban after 15-18 weeks. The average woman, according to WPTV, finds out they are pregnant between 6-8 weeks, and the majority of states have bans before the 6-8 weeks. Say a young woman finds out they are pregnant at 5 weeks and they are considering an abortion, is one week enough time to make that life-altering decision? Or in states where it is completely banned, is no time at all enough to decide if they are ready to become a mother or go through the physical and mental changes of just being pregnant? The government of your state shouldn't decide your future.

Some people's argument for why abortions should be illegal is "You can't kill a living fetus." Well, pregnancies aren't always safe, what if the mother's life is at risk? Forcing a woman to choose a fetus's life over her own isn't fair. Making a mother give birth even if the baby is stillborn and forcing the mother to go through that traumatizing event isn't right.

The government shouldn't dictate what women do with their bodies, we should have freedom with what we want to do. Women are capable of making decisions for themselves even if someone doesn't agree with them because at the end of the day, it's their choice and it affects them the most. If a woman gets pregnant and chooses to get an abortion it doesn't change the life of a politician, it will change the life of the mother, if they are choosing an abortion they should have that right and they know the consequences and that is their choice.

Abortions will happen no matter what, whether safe and legal, or dangerous and illegal. Abortions will happen and the government needs to make it safe and legal to protect women. Being able to get an abortion legally was a freedom for women for decades and now that is being taken away, if our country wants to progress there have to be easily accessible abortion clinics throughout the nation, and easily accessible birth control to prevent women from getting pregnant if they choose to take birth control. Women in our country deserve to have control of their lives and to be given choices about their bodies, not have them be taken away.

Maddy McHale (Burlington High School, Freshman)

The overuse of juvenile incarceration is costing America more than just money. After the 1980's war on drugs, America has become a world leader in youth incarceration, having 11 times the incarceration rate of Western Europe. Certain states spend up to an astounding \$214,620 per child annually. Additional reports show that this yearly price of detention costs 9 times as much as it would if that same child was enrolled in k-12 public education. Despite the focus America puts on juvenile detention, extensive research shows that the penalty is not only ineffective in preventing future crime, but shows a 70% to 80% chance of reoffending within three years after release. As the practices often employed in incarceration are punitive, they neglect to address the root cause of the child's behavior, and only reinforces their label as a criminal. Furthermore, these measures have been proven detrimental to the child's stability mentally, physically, and financially in adulthood. Shifting the focus from incarceration to a more restorative approach would not only be more beneficial for the child's rehabilitation, reducing future reoffending, and increasing public safety, but also could help to alleviate the heavy cost that juvenile incarceration requires. In order to do this, incarceration must be used as a last resort.

New Zealand is a prime example of successful reform. In 1980's, New Zealand had one of the highest juvenile incarceration rates in the world. Since then, New Zealand has restructured their juvenile justice system from retributive, to restorative, and have seen a drastic decline in crime. An instrumental factor in this systematic shift was the 1989 legislation: The children's and young people's well-being act. This act requires police to respond to minor crimes with a warning or court diversion, incorporating the stakeholders in the crime to create a plan of requirements to best repair the harm done. Currently, 75% of youth who come into Name with the police are handled this way, this correlates with a 2017 study that found a 33% decrease in youth crime.

Some states in the US have already taken from New Zealand's example, implementing court diversion into their own justice system. Washington Pierce County, Washington diverted 82% on delinquency changes from 2017-2019, 60% in Multnomah County, Oregon. Studies show youth enrolled in these diversion programs show a 45% reduction in recidivism comparatively to those incarcerated. Not only is diversion more effective, but it's significantly cheaper. at \$75 daily, as opposed to the \$558 per child in detainment.

Following New Zealand's model, America should hold youth accountable by funding restorative alternatives that avoid the long-term ramifications of incarceration. This investment would instill higher public safety, equity for our youths' future, and help to reduce the heavy financial toll detention puts on taxpayers. With approximately 60,000 children incarcerated on any given day, it's imperative we make this shift now. If not, we will continue on this trajectory of perpetuating the self-fulfilling prophecy of criminalization that juvenile incarceration enforces on our youth.

Andres Miguez (Mount Mansfield Union High School, Junior)

July 10th, 2023, was a day that would change the future of our little state, with severe weather warning Vermonters around the state prepared for heavy rainfall. The Lake Champlain tributaries and vast array of streams and rivers quickly began to flood much faster than anticipated, and unbeknownst citizens were the victims of the ruthless floodwaters. The flood left thousands of homes flooded and destroyed major parts of local infrastructure. In the midst of winter, Vermont was just hit with another flash flood. This instance was unexpected and left those in flood zones flooded during the cool temperatures of the Vermont winter. These instances beg the question: What is the future of our state if repeated flooding continually bombards our people and infrastructure?

According to the National Weather Service, the state has risen 2 degrees Fahrenheit in the past decade. Each year, we see increased rainfall in correlation to global warming as well as shifting weather patterns. Therefore, the flooding can be attributed to changing weather patterns and climate change. With the rising temperatures and weather patterns affecting the future of our state, a flooding solution is crucial to the future of our state's prosperity.

I propose the Flood Land Management Act, an act that would ensure the safety and prosperity of future generations of Vermonters who will also face the adverse effects of climate change and flooding in our state. The act will implement new zoning permit regulations and require structures to be flood code-compliant, as well as require existing structures to be altered to become compliant with the new flood code. This management act would apply to the areas previously affected by the two floods we have endured in the past six months, as well as other areas prone to potential future flooding. By requiring watertight foundations and elevating structures, as well as rebuilding our river banks and drainage systems under the Flood Management Act, we can inherently improve the lives of current and future generations while unifying our state to confront an alarming issue in the era of a new environmental crisis.

The Flood Land Management Act will initiate action necessary for the future of our state; flooding will repeatedly affect Vermont citizens until necessary action is taken. The Flood Land Management Act is the next necessary step in improving the future of our state and promoting the safety and prosperity of our people.

Oliver Nichols (Burlington High School, Freshman)

Limited medical access is one of the leading causes of death in the U.S. This issue is important because it affects around half of Americans, that's 165,950,000 people. But we could help with the accessibility of healthcare if we invested in mobile health clinics.

Healthcare access and mistreatment are major issues in the U.S. I've personally experienced problems in healthcare in the U.S., as have many Americans. The U.S. had an 88.7 rating in healthcare quality and access in 2016, which is lower than the average for most big countries. Limited medical access is one of the leading causes of death in the U.S. Healthcare quality and access "measures preventable mortality rates for 32 causes of death. A higher rating suggests fewer deaths due to a higher standard of care and access." This means that the U.S. has more fatalities and medical mistreatment than the rest of the larger countries in their group. Doctors are in short supply and doctors rush through their medications to get to the next patient, misdiagnosing and misdosing patients. All of these factors contribute to why healthcare is such a problem in the U.S. Per the KFF, "About half of U.S. adults say they have difficulty affording healthcare costs. About four in ten U.S. adults say they have delayed or gone without medical care in the last year due to cost." In 2021, 40% of adults in the U.S. didn't have immediate access to health care. The big reason for so many people is cost, many people don't have the money to get medical help and millions of Americans are at risk.

Congress needs to invest in mobile health clinics - converting campers and busses into mini hospital rooms. If we had enough of these clinics, people in faraway towns and rural areas could get healthcare locally, instead of driving for hours to get medical help. Imagine someone has a stroke in a small town - the further the hospital, the less chance of survival. With a clinic right in town, that person can get almost immediate healthcare. Per Tulane University, "Mobile health clinics provide quality care at a lower cost than that of traditional healthcare delivery modes...for every \$1 spent on mobile health, \$12 is saved." Mobile health clinics would be beneficial in care and in cost. Per the USC "Historically, providers have been unwilling to establish services in small, rural communities because they lack large hospital systems and populations with money to pay for services...[and] small rural towns may not have the latest technology to offer the highest level of care. This means people have to travel away from their home community to get medical care." With mobile health clinics, rural Americans would finally access healthcare.

Healthcare access is a big problem in the United States. If the government issued more mobile health clinics, we could have more widespread healthcare at lower costs, while maintaining quality and accessibility.

Thomas Scheetz (Mount Anthony Union High School, Senior)

"Just leave it, then," the exhausted woman said with a sigh before walking away from my register at Price Chopper and out the door. When I read her total, she realized she could not afford her modest grocery order; defeated, she left the store immediately, her cart still in the middle of the aisle.

The Bennington Price Chopper, and other grocery stores across Vermont and this country, host similar sad scenes every day. Grocery prices went up nearly 25% between the beginning of 2020 and mid-2023, including a 10% increase in the single year of 2022. The major increase in basic food prices is compounded by massive increases in prices for other necessities. Housing prices are stratospherically high; the median sale price of a house nationwide nearly doubled between Q4 2012 and Q4 2022, and median rents for one-bedroom apartments nationwide soared by more than 20% during the pandemic. Heating oil prices, moreover, have increased in Vermont by nearly 50% since January 2020. And families incur even more burdensome expenses; the cost of child care in Vermont and many other states takes up 20% or more of the median family income, and college tuition has risen to absurd heights in recent decades. For many people, it is too expensive simply to exist in this country. Consequently, recent surveys suggest that more than 77% of Americans are anxious about finances, 68% worry they will never afford retirement, and nearly 30% suffer negative mental health impacts due to financial concerns.

Overall, the recent sudden, meteoric rise in cost of living in America is unsustainable; it causes drastic, sweeping harms to nearly all segments of the population. It must be swiftly met with calculated, multifaceted action. Large corporations and overly wealthy individuals, powerful yet unelected, are among the most responsible for the crisis, so they must be held accountable. They must be forced to pay their employees a living wage according to new legislation that raises the minimum wage annually with inflation. Corporate taxes must be heightened, furthermore, and these revenues must go towards the construction of new housing developments with units for low- and middle-income families. The new supply will ease housing costs, the single biggest monthly expense for most families. High housing costs can be further alleviated with new legislation to prohibit the ownership of single-family homes by corporations and with increased property taxes on vacation homes and investment properties.

The insidious cost-of-living crisis poses a complex issue that can only be solved with a bold multi-pronged approach. Each aspect of the problem -- from corporate greed to housing and everything in between -- must be assertively addressed with legislation. These legislative acts, in addition to assuaging the situation by themselves, will beg the question: should wealthy corporations be allowed to enrich themselves by driving up individual costs, paying lousy wages to the working class, and generally assaulting the American Dream? When societal attitudes towards this question change, the cost-of-living crisis will be solved once and for all.

Magdelina Short (Bellows Free Academy – Fairfax, Sophomore)

When faced with the thought of a life lost to fentanyl overdose, many people think of an addict who never wanted help, a criminal, or a life that was not worthy regardless. The first thought that comes to my mind is my friend Grace Riley, whose life was taken by fentanyl on June 2, 2022 at age 21. Grace was hardworking, an athlete, a role model and a friend whose kindness shone in countless people's lives. If she had not been sold the singular fentanyl pill, which she thought was a Percocet, she would be taking college courses, making art, and working towards her goals of recovery so that she could become an addiction counselor to help those in her place.

According to the CDC, drug overdose death rates involving fentanyl increased by 279% between 2016 and 2021. These dramatic increases will only heighten, unless more honest and empathetic education is provided around the dangers of fentanyl along with how to assist someone experiencing symptoms of an overdose. Within mine and many of my peers' education, the only information our school system has provided regarding addiction and overdose has been minimal and creates a stigmatized bias against those struggling with addiction. Along with this our current education has not provided information on what to do in an emergency overdose situation. Only being shown short clips of vulnerable addicts in health class or reading large statistics with no personal story not only dehumanizes the tragedy of a life lost to overdose, but encourages judgment. These methods of teaching can overlook the struggles students or their loved ones may face regarding substance abuse and overdose.

Education must begin including lessons on how to administer Naloxone to a person in an emergency overdose situation. Naloxone, more popularly known as Narcan, is a nasal spray which not only is easy to administer but according to CNN can reverse up to 93% of opioid overdoses. If students are taught how to administer Naloxone they're given the ability to save the life of a peer, family member, or even a stranger.

Impactful education must start with understanding the lives taken by fentanyl overdose and addiction. The lives of real humans who had their own struggles, lives, and possibilities to offer the world. One method that can be used when teaching students about the dangers of fentanyl is by sharing real stories of people whose lives were taken by the drug. Organizational psychologist Peg Neuhauser found that learning stemming from stories is remembered more accurately, and much longer, than learning derived from facts and figures. This is because stories like Grace's are ones that students could see themselves or people they love in. Seeing the humans behind large statistics at a more personal level creates more urgency around such a pressing issue.

Education without stigma is the necessary starting point to ending fentanyl overdose. If these educational practices are widely implemented many lives have the potential to be saved.

Jackson Wheaton (Northfield Middle & High School, Freshman)

All life is interconnected and Vermont is at the precipice of an environmental calamity: our fish are dying. Climate change in Vermont is significantly impacting our fish population in streams and waterways. With increased flooding and warmer temperatures, more and more damage is being done to our lakes, ponds, rivers, and streams. Erratic weather patterns caused by climate change are making our fish habitats more unstable. As an avid fisherman, I am concerned about the health and future of Vermont's native and non-native fish species and believe the government should step in to save our food chain.

According to an interview conducted by WCAX News of multiple Vermont Wildlife Officials, the fluctuating weather is causing alewives to wash up. They concluded, "The non-native species are subject to seasonal fish kills because they can't handle the lake's [Lake Champlain] cold temperatures." Anecdotally, my great grandfather, James MacMartin, was a biologist for Vermont Fish and Wildlife during the 1950s and 1960s and conducted extensive studies of Vermont watersheds and fish species. He found our lakes and streams to be extremely healthy. An annual report from Fish and Wildlife compared his research from the 1950s to the fish population in the 2000s. They surveyed 205 streams, the same 205 streams that my great grandfather surveyed to compare the changes since the 1950's. According to VTDigger, 50-60% of brook trout in Pond Brook have died.

While climate change is not an easy problem to solve, with regard to our declining fish population, my solution to protect the waterways and fish of Vermont is to include more stringent protection of catch and release. If Vermont employed more game wardens, there would be greater enforcement of fishing laws and protection of those bodies of water. The average brook trout stocking during the 1950's was 1,701,499 as compared to brook trout stocking in the 2000' which was 243,435. Each year Vermont Fish and Wildlife stocked 34,029 fewer brook trout over the 50 years. The reason for this is habit degradation and fragmentation. Another solution is more stringent protection of waterways, including no boats on certain ponds or lakes, to help curb the spreading of invasive species.

When one part of our ecosystem is out of balance, it affects the viability of all living things. Our delicate ecosystem ravaged by flooding and erratic weather patterns needs more protection now than ever before. All living things have a purpose, and it is time we take action to protect nature's most important resources.