

# JAMES & BONGARTZ

## STATE REPRESENTATIVES

Arlington • Manchester • Sandgate • Sunderland

### Connect With Us!

Together, we represent the Bennington-4 district (Manchester, Arlington, Sandgate and part of Sunderland) in the Vermont House of Representatives.

**Rep. Kathleen James** serves as Assistant Majority Leader and ranking member of the House General and Housing Committee.

**Rep. Seth Bongartz** serves as ranking member of the House Environment and Energy Committee.

The legislature won't reconvene until January 2024, but we'll continue to hold coffee hours and meet with constituents. Be in touch!

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### After five months of hard work in Montpelier, the 2023 legislative session has come to a close.

When we ran for re-election in 2022, we highlighted the need for a permanent solution to the childcare crisis and the need to make real progress on the housing crisis. We delivered on those promises. As ranking member of the House Environment and Energy Committee, Seth was the lead author of the housing bill (S.100) that passed in the final days of the session. As assistant majority leader, Kathleen helped to ensure that the childcare bill (H.217) contained resources adequate to put the system on stable long-term footing. Just as the legislature took significant steps to fix the pension system in 2021, we have now secured the future of childcare in Vermont and taken crucial steps toward alleviating the housing crisis.



**CHILDCARE: It’s Essential**

The legislature passed a landmark childcare bill this year. H.217 accomplishes what families, childcare providers and employers have been asking lawmakers to do for years: It creates a sustainable revenue source to fix our state’s broken childcare system.

Time and again, we’ve heard that the system is in crisis. Families can’t afford high tuition, so providers can’t charge a rate that covers their costs. So they raise rates as much as they can, offer fewer slots, and pay their staff low salaries.

H.217 increases the Child Care Financial Assistance Program so more families will qualify for help on an income-based sliding scale. It also increases the rates we pay providers, so they can stabilize their finances and raise wages.

Starting July 1, 2024, we put a payroll tax in place to pay for this. Not all Vermonters will be impacted – it’s paid by employers and employees, the folks who most benefit from a thriving childcare system. The tax rate will be 0.44%, with employers paying 0.33% and employees 0.11%. For someone earning \$50,000, the employer would pay \$165 and the employee \$55 for the year. **Meanwhile, Vermont families will save millions.**

Right now, a four-person family with an infant and toddler receiving full-time care at a center-based program – and an income of \$105,300 – is not eligible for subsidy. They’re spending \$35,204 a year for childcare (\$677 per week). With the passage of H.217, this family will be eligible for subsidies with an estimated weekly co-pay of \$225, saving \$23,500 a year. This same family would pay \$115 for the year through the new payroll tax.

Allowing our childcare system to collapse would cost far more than we’ve dedicated to keeping it solvent.

**H.494: A Balanced State Budget**

On May 12 the legislature approved a balanced \$8.5 billion budget that funds our state government, state employees, community partners, programs and services for the 2024 fiscal year. H.494 uses one-time federal stimulus funds for strategic one-time investments, while covering ongoing annual expenses with broad-based and stable revenues. By investing in Vermont, we support our economy, our communities, and our families. We build the budget in a way that solves problems, rather than kicking the can down the road. It’s a responsible approach to good governance that weighs costs and benefits, makes tough choices, and then delivers sufficient dollars to meet the needs of today while setting up for a stronger future.

**>> Housing (\$211 million):** The budget includes \$109 million to expand affordable housing by building more units statewide, rehabbing rental units that are not up to code, and helping property owners create accessory dwelling units (ADUs, also known as “in-law” apartments). We also earmarked \$102 million for a range of other housing services, including shelter for homeless Vermonters and helping mobile-home communities with infrastructure and repairs.

**>> Raising Provider Rates (\$99.7 million):** We’re boosting Medicaid reimbursement rates for primary and specialty care, dental care, home health, nursing homes, adult day care, substance use and mental health, ambulance services and more. Increasing these rates will help us attract and retain workforce, meet demand for services, and free up hospital emergency rooms.

**>> Childcare (\$76 million):** This investment — the first in a multi-year transformation — will make childcare more affordable for families, increase financial stability for childcare providers, and boost pay for our valued early childhood workforce.

**>> Universal School Meals (\$29 million):** We’re permanently funding the popular pandemic-era program that provides no-cost, no-stigma meals to all Vermont school children. Across the state, teachers have been clear: This program is a game-changer for children’s nutrition, health and behavior.

**>> Workforce and Higher Ed (\$74 million):** The budget contains funds to attract and retain workers in fields with shortages, including nursing, dental hygiene, teachers, psychiatric care and the skilled trades. It funds UVM and Vermont State University, scholarships like 802 Opportunity, and programs to help adult education, small business and small farms, rural industry, working lands enterprises and much more.

**>> Substance Misuse Prevention and Recovery:** H.494 invests \$20 million to expand Vermont’s “hub and spoke” treatment system for opioid use disorder and also funds recovery centers, recovery housing and after school, youth mentoring and prevention programs across the state.

**To learn more about the FY24 state budget, go to: [ljfo.vermont.gov](http://ljfo.vermont.gov).**



**EDUCATION UPDATES**

Vermont has a unique education landscape in that 44 of its 114 school districts do not operate a public school for some grade levels. In our district, Sunderland, Sandgate and Manchester are non-operating with regards to high school. Instead, we pay tuition to the high school of the family's choice.

Last year, in *Carson vs. Makin*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that states that offer transferable tuition – school choice – cannot deny students using state dollars the right to attend religious schools solely because they are religious. Meanwhile, the Vermont Constitution says a school district may pay public tuition dollars to a religious school only if there are safeguards against state money being used for religious worship or instruction.

This year, the House passed a bill (H.483) that attempted to resolve this issue. We voted no, concerned about its impact on independent schools. The bill did not pass the Senate. We'll follow this issue closely in 2024.

**\$5,000 for 2023 Grads!**

Last year, the legislature created a new program to encourage Vermont college students to stay in the Green Mountain State. That program is now up and running, offering \$5,000 in loan repayment funds to 2023 grads with a bachelor's degree.

Funds are first-come, first-served and awarded based on regional, employer and institutional distribution criteria. To see a list of eligible institutions and find out how to apply, go to: <https://www.uvm.edu/engagement/greenmountainjobs>

**Housing: Slow and Steady Progress**

From March 2020 through May 2022, Vermont has invested \$908 million — mostly federal stimulus funding — into expanding our housing supply and providing housing services and assistance. Even with these investments, it will take time to solve our acute housing shortage: As in many states, it's the result of years of underbuilding, now exacerbated by the pandemic. Local leadership is key.

**This year, Seth took the lead in the passage of S.100, a comprehensive housing bill that updates our land-use policies to encourage development where we want it — in vibrant, livable and walkable downtowns — while discouraging sprawl.**

These updates include zoning changes to enable more housing density, like allowing duplexes wherever single-family homes are allowed and at least five housing units per acre in areas served by water and sewer. We also made time-limited changes to Act 250 to make it easier to build housing in designated growth centers, downtowns, village centers and NDAs. Importantly, we also made it harder to appeal much-needed housing projects.

In all, we're investing \$211 million in housing this year. This includes \$109 million to acquire, build or renovate affordable housing, bring more rental units onto the market, and create accessory dwelling units. We continue to fight for funding that helps the so-called "missing middle," Vermonters of moderate income who do not qualify for assistance yet struggle to find housing they can afford.

**Property Taxes: Rates are Down but Home Values are Rising**

Every year, the legislature sets the property tax rate based on the sum of voter-approved school budgets passed across the state. (In other words: Voters approve school budgets at the local level, and the legislature then sets a rate sufficient to cover this statewide total.) This year, due to increased student needs in the aftermath of the pandemic, voter-approved school spending went up statewide. Fortunately, Vermont had increased revenues to help cover those budgets. **For the upcoming FY24 fiscal year, the average homestead property tax rate will be \$1.311, lower than last year's rate of \$1.386.** The non-homestead rate will be \$1.391, lower than last year's rate of \$1.466. Vermonters who pay based on income will pay 2.32%, the same as last year. Despite these rates, your tax bill still may be higher because it's also based on property values, which have risen substantially. With that in mind, we also set aside some of this year's surplus revenue to help offset next year's taxes.

**VT SAVES: A New Public Retirement Program for Vermonters**

Most Americans, including Vermonters, have inadequate personal retirement savings. This is particularly true for those who are self-employed or who work for small employers. S.135 creates a new public retirement initiative, VTSaves, to provide employees not currently covered by a workplace retirement plan access to one at no cost to their employers. VTSaves kicks off in 2025 and will be transformational for Vermonters' long-term financial and economic security.



## Preventing Suicide

Vermont's suicide rate is 50% higher than the national average, and the vast majority of suicides in Vermont are completed with a firearm. A child that lives in a home with a gun has a 440% increased chance of suicide. This public health crisis drove the legislature's work on H.230, a bill that will reduce suicide and save lives by reducing access to lethal means.

The bill requires a 72-hour waiting period for gun sales, a reasonable time period that will slow the impulsive actions that often lead to suicide. By creating penalties for negligent storage, children will be less likely to find unsecured guns. Household members will also be empowered to directly petition a judge for an Extreme Risk Protection Order to temporarily remove guns from a home when someone is in crisis.

With H.481, Vermont's Director of Suicide Prevention will provide schools with a model for reducing suicide rates, investigate the role of eating disorders in causing suicide, and create more services for the community when tragedy occurs.

**988 is a toll-free, 24/7 suicide and crisis hotline. Or go to: <https://vtspc.org/get-help/>.**

## Get the Facts: Affordable Heat Act

S.5, the Affordable Heat Act, targets how we heat our buildings. The goal is to help Vermonters save money and reduce climate pollution by transitioning away from fossil fuels to cleaner, more sustainable heat. We'd accomplish this goal not by taxes or mandates, but by requiring fossil-fuel dealers to help interested Vermonters — and especially those with fixed, low or moderate incomes — do things like weatherize, install heat pumps, or switch to advanced wood heat at a lower price through financial incentives.

**In May, the legislature gave final approval to S.5. With that step, the legislature set in motion a two-year public process of study and design. This will include nonpartisan reports that analyze the cost and savings for Vermonters — including any future impact on fuel prices — and also drafting the rules that would govern the proposed program. The first report is due in February 2024.**

In 2025, this detailed information will return to the legislature for consideration. Legislators can vote to approve the draft rules, reject them, or revise in any way they believe will be in the best interests of Vermonters. All of these options will require drafting a brand-new bill, taking testimony, passage by both House and the Senate, and the signature of the Governor. The program can't be implemented until and unless it passes these steps.

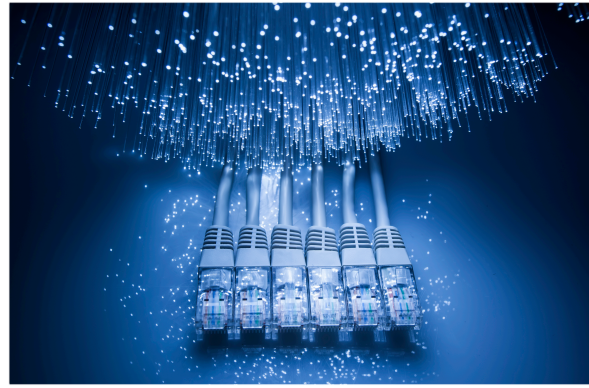
The Affordable Heat Act is controversial — in part because it's complicated; in part because of inaccurate information injected by opponents; and in part because fundamental change is, in fact, difficult. Vermonters have an opportunity to cut climate pollution and save billions in the next few decades and beyond by switching to renewable energy. The hard part will be the transition. **Voting “yes” in 2023 was a vote to gain the information Vermonters need — and deserve — to make a thoughtful decision in 2025.**

In the meantime, **nothing in S.5 will raise the cost of heating our homes next winter.** Any increase in this cost will be due to the same forces that all of us — including the local businesses that deliver fuel to our homes — have been experiencing for years: price fluctuations in the volatile world oil market.

*Check out our updated S.5 webpage (<https://kathjamesforstaterep.com/get-the-facts-affordable-heat-act-s-5/>) with links, videos, testimony, a timeline of upcoming reports and steps in the public rule-drafting process, and much more.*

## 30x30: Protecting Vermont's Landscape for Future Generations

H.126 charts a path to achieve the permanent conservation of 30% of Vermont's landscape by 2030 and 50% by 2050. It also funds an updated inventory of the approximately 26% of lands already conserved. More than 70 countries, including the United States, have signed onto this goal, which is critical to preserving wildlife habitat, old-growth forest and our working lands. By conserving Vermont's natural lands, we also help to lower flood risks, mitigate drought, capture more carbon, and in general boost our resilience to climate change.



## High-Speed Broadband: Rolling Out!

High-speed broadband is rolling out across our region this year, well ahead of schedule. Since 2019, this effort has been led by dedicated volunteers at the Southern Vermont Communications Union District (SoVT CUD).

Through a public-private partnership with Fidium – and fueled by a \$27 million investment in both public and private funds – competitively priced fiber has already been offered to SoVT CUD member towns in southern Bennington County during Phase 1. Phase 2 is now underway in Dorset, Landgrove, Londonderry, Manchester, Peru, Pownal, Rupert and Sandgate. Work should be complete by the end of 2023, including 2,000 homes that have never been reached.

Without broadband, Vermont cannot attract and retain the next generation workforce and families. Landlords and real-estate agents can't fill properties. Remote workers can't work. Students can't complete their studies. Emerging technologies like telemedicine, a more responsive and resilient electric grid, and new transportation alternatives are off the table. Without high-speed internet, rural economies suffer and older Vermonters are more isolated and left behind.

**To learn more, go to [sovtcud.net](http://sovtcud.net). Or go to [fidiumfiber.com](http://fidiumfiber.com) to see whether this new service is a good option for your home and your budget.**

## Protecting Health Care Providers & Patients

Vermont continues to lead the nation in progressive health care policy. H.89 establishes the highest possible level of legal protection for Vermont-based providers of reproductive and gender-affirming health care and the patients receiving that care. S.37 guarantees that our

health care providers will not lose their licenses and certifications due to injurious laws in other states. It also requires "crisis pregnancy centers" to comply with Vermont's laws and standards of practice (including laws that forbid deceptive advertising), ensures the supply of medications used in reproductive care, and increases access to contraceptives on college campuses.

S.36 also protects health care workers, though in this case the threat is physical harm. A troubling rise in assaults on hospital workers led the legislature to pass this bill, which allows law enforcement to arrest a person without a warrant when that person assaults or criminally threatens a health care worker in a hospital or someone providing emergency medical treatment (EMT).

## More Support for Rural EMS

Faced with rising call volumes, staff and volunteer shortages, and reimbursement rates that do not cover the cost of service delivery, EMS services are struggling to keep pace with the needs of our communities. The budget funding to stabilize our EMS system includes increasing Medicaid reimbursement rates for services, investing \$1 million in training for EMS personnel, and commissioning a report to provide recommendations for improving our emergency medical system.

## Investing in Vermont's Workforce

One of the biggest problems facing Vermont's health care system is the severe shortage of essential **health care** professionals. Too many patients have been left waiting, sometimes for months, before they receive appointments with necessary specialists. This year, the legislature passed four bills that will allow many providers to join interstate licensure compacts.

These compacts allow a health care provider to use their Vermont license in any other state that is also a compact member. Additionally, professionals in other compact member states will be able to practice here, whether in-person or via telemedicine. The bills cover mental health counselors, physical therapists, speech-language pathologists and audiologists, and psychologists.

Meanwhile, **teacher workforce** shortages continue to impact schools across Vermont. The FY24 state budget (H.494) funds several initiatives to address this problem, including grants to expand mentoring and professional development for prospective educators as they seek licensure, and the creation of a \$2.5 million forgivable loan program. To be eligible, recipients agree to work as



a public-school teacher in Vermont for a minimum of one year for each year of loan awarded.

The FY24 budget also provides \$2.3 million for Serve, Learn and Earn, an innovative workforce development partnership of Vermont Works for Women, Audubon Vermont, ReSOURCE and Vermont Youth Conservation Corps. Through a variety of creative approaches, they are training Vermonters for jobs in the **skilled trades**, conservation, construction, weatherization and more.

## Tackling Toxic Chemicals & Plastic Pollution

The legislature passed several bills this year that protect public health – and our ecosystems – from toxic chemicals and plastic pollution. H.67 requires the manufacturers of **household products that contain hazardous substances** to belong to a program that would pay for collection and disposal, as well as public outreach and education. And the bottle bill (H.158) invests in the much-needed modernization and expansion of the decades-old deposit system. It will **keep more bottles and cans out of the landfill** and reduce the energy and emissions associated with plastic, aluminum, and glass bottle production. It requires that beverage manufacturers and distributors collaborate in a stewardship program, overseen by the Agency of Natural Resources, that will offer more convenient redemption locations and equipment, and extend deposit coverage to most beverages, including plastic water bottles and glass wine bottles.

## Opioid Epidemic: Reducing Fatal Overdose

Far too many Vermonters are losing their lives to fatal overdoses. In the spring of 2023, preliminary data reflected a 10% increase in overdose deaths, from 217 in 2021 to 239 in 2022. H.222 increases access to recovery housing, removes barriers to treatment for Vermonters on Medicaid, and modernizes Vermont's laws on

Naloxone (Narcan) to increase access to this life-saving medication. This bill also appropriates opiate settlement funds to establish drug-checking systems to detect the presence of deadly substances in different drugs.

## Aid for Our Ag and Forest Economy

>> More and more companies are putting up barriers—legal, physical, digital—that prevent consumers from fixing the products they own. For Vermont's loggers and farmers, this can mean waiting days or even weeks for an authorized tech. H.81, the **right to repair** bill, requires equipment manufacturers of agricultural and forestry equipment to make available, on fair and reasonable terms, the parts, tools, manuals and diagnostic materials needed to fix their products. This bill passed the House and will be taken up by the Senate next year.

>> More than 30 of Vermont's **organic dairy farms** have closed in the last two years. Production costs are skyrocketing, including rising fuel prices, expensive feed due to the Ukraine conflict, inflation, and last summer's drought. Organic farmers don't have the same safety net as conventional farmers because the calculation used in the federal Dairy Margin Coverage program – which helps bridge the gap when dairy prices are lower than production costs – don't take into account costs incurred or prices received by organic farmers. The FY24 budget includes one-time emergency relief for organic dairy farmers and also sets up a one-year pilot to help small farmers diversify their products.

## Criminal Justice Reform: Ongoing Work

S.4 sets aside \$5 million for a new Community Violence Prevention Program that will provide grants to **communities that have experienced a rise in drug-related violence**. Funds support innovative programs that address the root causes of violence and substance abuse. It also prohibits removal of a gun's serial number and the purchase of a gun for someone prohibited from owning or buying one. These "straw purchases" often occur when firearms are traded for drugs.

H.45 addresses domestic and sexual violence by limiting a convicted abuser's ability to use the court system to continue harming a survivor. This "abusive litigation" includes frequent filing of motions or complaints that the survivor then needs to answer, costing them money, time and any sense of safety or distance from their abuser.

**You can read bills and testimony, look up our voting records, and watch Vermont General Assembly committee and floor meetings at: [legislature.vermont.gov](https://legislature.vermont.gov).**