

# 2020 State of the Union Essay Contest Winning Essays



**U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders**

**Winner**

Isabelle Hiller (Woodstock Union High School, Junior)

**Second Place**

Lucas Whitaker (Hazen Union High School, Sophomore)

**Third Place**

Maya Marcy (Long Trail School, Junior)

**Finalists**

*(in alphabetical order)*

Hussein Amuri (Winooski High School)

Maely Brightman (St. Johnsbury Academy, Sophomore)

Isabelle Chen (Oxbow High School, Freshman)

Samuel Dooley (Milton High School, Senior)

Meredith Jackson (Burlington High School, Freshman)

Caleb Matosky (Rice Memorial High School, Junior)

Ethan Mello (Woodstock Union High School, Junior)

Salama Mbilizi (Winooski High School)

Patrick Meskill (Essex High School, Junior)

Madelyn Trimpi (Woodstock Union High School, Junior)

Griffin Waryas (Bellows Falls Union High School, Senior)

Kyle Wilkin (Missisquoi Valley Union High School, Junior)

## Winner

### **Isabelle Hiller (Woodstock Union High School, Junior)**

#### Education in Incarceration

Our country's federal prison system is stuck in an ethical rut. We seem to focus on securing institutions and confining offenders like savage dogs in a pound to “protect the public,” and disregard the fact that 44,000 prisoners return to society each year. The Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) claims that public safety is the goal of detention, but without any mental shift in convicts, all we do is press pause on their potential harm to society until their release. Currently, we have one of the highest prison populations in the world. Unless we plan to incarcerate all convicts for life, our approach to detainment should shift from ‘prison’ to ‘rehabilitation’, focusing on equipping prisoners with the skills to be mentally stable and financially and lawfully successful.

To do so, all prisoners should not only have access to academic resources, but be required to attend a set number of courses each year. Just a few decades ago, Finland had one of the highest imprisonment rates in Europe. Because of this, researchers started investigating its cause. They concluded that punishment does not help reduce crime. As a result, Finland began ‘decarceration,’ which was better for the prisoners and crime rates didn’t increase. Without teaching prisoners skills or continuing their education, we merely take them out of their lives and throw them back with no change, and no basis to be stable in any realm.

In the United States, prisoners have a higher likelihood of returning to illegal markets and returning to prison. As of October 2017, the BOP found that only 32 percent of the entire designated inmate population was enrolled in one or more education or recreation programs. Furthermore, participation decreases 16 percent in the recidivism population. The only academic requirement in our federal prison system is that inmates without a high school diploma or a General Education Development have to enroll in a literacy program, and need to be successful for good conduct time. However, even for this requirement alone, there is a stoppage to access the program due to overflow of over 16,000 inmates— that’s a lot of potential students. Plus, although mock job and resume builder courses are offered, inmates do not take advantage of them—even with the knowledge that occupational training program participants are 33 percent less likely to recidivate.

By increasing funding of education, we ensure equal accessibility to all courses for those 16,000 or more inmates wanting to take courses. Consequently the recidivism rate will reduce, decreasing our total prison population, and lower the overall government spending on imprisonment as a whole. By treating inmates like humans in their time of rehabilitation, with a lower recidivism rate, we more confidently ensure public safety when 44,000 convicts are released each year, strengthening the Department of Justice’s prison system core ideologies. Although we have the right end goal, we need to rethink the process by which we get there for the sake of the public’s safety and security.

## Second Place

### **Lucas Whitaker (Hazen Union High School, Sophomore)**

One of the biggest issues in America's society today is the mental health crisis in our youth, relating back to the lack of mental health services in our schools. In many cases, this leads to preventable death by suicide. According to a 2017 study by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP), suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the U.S.

Paula Clayton, medical director of AFSP, states that 90% of youth that kill themselves have a treatable psychiatric disorder. She explains that even in suicide clusters, there's almost always an underlying disorder, whether it's due to at-home issues or anything else that may be going on, suicide is the last straw. From this information we can gather that mental health is a big part of losing students to suicide. There are several steps that can be taken to ensure that our youth are getting the help they need.

First of all, mental health professionals on campus is a priority. If funds are an issue, as they usually are, fundraisers are always an option. Schools tend to raise funds for their athletic and music departments, as well as others, but typically not for mental health. Money can be raised in fundraisers not unlike the ones that are used to raise money for extracurricular activities. This way mental health professionals can be on campus for students to speak with at any time, and having the money for this wouldn't be such an issue. Fundraising aside, mental health services are important enough to be state/government-funded.

Another step that can be taken is the steady normalization of mental health discussions. In society today as a whole mental health is a touchy topic. But with proper approach, these conversations can be normalized so that people are comfortable asking for help without being faced with stereotypes or fear of judgment. This can start with general annual assemblies about the topic and good coverage of the topic in classes. Even a unit in health classes or professionals coming in to speak with students on the subject for a few days can be beneficial.

In a lot of cases, a student will end their life and it will result in suicide clusters, or what is more commonly known as 'copycat suicides'. It's like a trigger that sets off a line of students attempting suicide after another student succeeds. If there is ever a situation in a community where someone ends their life, schoolwide mental health screenings are crucial. There are many non-profit organizations that offer screening kits that ultimately lower suicide rates. These kits usually include short, non-diagnostic screens for signs of depression and suicide that could even be beneficial as an annual subject. These are usually completely anonymous and encourage students to seek help.

Mental health issues are undoubtedly crucial in our youth today. There are several ways we as a country can improve the quality of mental health services in our schools for a brighter future for our generation.

## **Third Place**

### **Maya Marcy (Long Trail School, Junior)**

For many, college is a liberating opportunity to further one's academic career and pursue a lifelong passion, as well as create a substantial base to obtain an income and begin life in adulthood. As well, with the increasingly competitive workforce, a college degree is almost mandatory to make a living wage. However, accessibility to attend a post-high school institution continues to prove difficult for not only marginalized groups, but also students coming from the middle class. This difficulty arises from the injustice embedded within the education system, a lack of government responsibility, and the senseless and excessive cost attributed to college in the present day.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, undergraduate enrollment in any post-secondary educational institution has increased from 53% to 94% in just the past 40 years. Accompanying the growth in attendance is the skyrocketing of tuition, a near 260% overall increase compared to a 120% average inflation consumer product increase, according to Business Insider. With this disparity in tuition cost vs. income, the difference has resulted in the form of \$1.5 trillion of student debt among more than 40 million Americans, as reported by TIME.

With this, why is so little of the federal budget set aside for such a vital part of our society? There is a simple solution. There is no reason, that in a time of peace, The United States should be spending upwards of \$690 billion per year on the military. According to the annual fiscal Department of Defense budget report, in the most recent proposal to Congress, President Donald Trump has introduced an almost 10% increase in military spending, increasing the budget to an astonishing \$750 billion. To put facts along with numbers, with a little over 10% of the entirety of the military spending budget—approximately \$80 billion—the United States could cover the cost of public 4-year college education for every aspiring student in the country. Putting this plan into action would provide an opportunity for millions of deserving, hardworking students.

The opportunity to obtain an education is one that many in the United States take for granted. We are fortunate enough in the United States to have many of the most distinguished Universities, programs, and professors in the world. However, the inability to acknowledge and tackle the underlying factors of how economic disparity affects the education system remains apparent. Too often marginalized groups are kept from succeeding in comparison to their privileged peers. Wealth and the quality of schooling have collided for too long. Every young adult has the right to a deserving and fulfilling academic career, regardless of their upbringing. We must realize now that the only way to fix the education system is to approach it as an economic matter. From then on, we will achieve equity and prosperity through the American college system.

## Finalists

*(in alphabetical order)*

### **Hussein Amuri (Winooski High School)**

“Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

Emma Lazarus, a native-born American, included these sentiments in the sonnet “The New Colossus” engraved on the pedestal that supports the Statue of Liberty. The words and the statue embody the greatness and intellect of this country. I am a teenage immigrant from Tanzania, whose family fled the Second Congo Civil War to enter the “golden door.” Those words are not just words to me, they represent my reality. Yet, I think America is moving away from these values, dishonoring the hard-won identity of countless immigrants. I think America needs to reclaim these values because diversity forms this country’s strength and its path to renaissance.

People fleeing wars, persecution, and conflict founded the United States to build better lives. Our founders, like my family, arrived poor and desperate. Today, however, Americans attack newcomers, blame them for economic tribulations and cultural disruption. Do we steal jobs and fail to pay taxes? No, these so-called beliefs are myths. According to the National Foundation for American Policy, 55% of the country’s \$1 billion start-up companies—such as Uber, SpaceX, and Avant—had at least one immigrant founder and each start-up created more than 760 jobs. In my hometown of Winooski, we have popular ethnic restaurants like Pho Dang Vietnamese Cafe and Tiny Thai; grocery stores like Sagarthama Grocery and Asian Market; businesses built and owned by immigrants, the “huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” Many people from around Vermont find job opportunities here, including myself. Native-born Americans come to shop and enjoy themselves at these shops and restaurants.

In 2017, working immigrant households paid \$405 billion dollars in taxes; DACA-eligible residents paid \$4 billion, according to the New America Economy Coalition. Legal and unauthorized immigrants pay taxes. Poor, “wretched refuse,” struggling in our home countries, we decided that America offered more opportunities, and brought our cultures, ways of life, and strong wills here. We enhance the economy and introduce new perspectives to American life. My beautiful mother hardly speaks English and works two jobs to support herself and my brothers. She pays taxes. We see her seldom because she's usually at work. From where we sit, she's contributing a lot to the economy.

We are “your tired, your poor.” We are “the homeless, tempest-tost.” We are here today and contributing to this country. We are the New Colossus and represent the words engraved on the pedestal supporting the Statue of Liberty. Can we keep the legacy of this sonnet alive, a legacy that truly defines this country’s strength, roots to renaissance, and diversity? Listen and acknowledge stories from my mother and thousands of other immigrants. Those stories are full of hardship and revitalization. In despair, we came to “lift our lamps, beside the golden door,” and we found hope for ourselves and the United States of America.

## **Maely Brightman (St. Johnsbury Academy, Sophomore)**

Today in many schools, students are receiving inadequate sex education and it's negatively impacting their health and well-being. In the United States only 24 states require public schools to have sex education and 20 of them require it to be medically accurate. The lack of coverage on subjects such as safe sex, LGBTQ topics, menstruation, and body image is damaging the well-being of today's youths.

Research shows that having accurate comprehensive sex education classes leads to lower rates of teen pregnancy and contracting an STI. Teens understand the importance of using protection and contraceptives. In fact, NCLS states that people age 15-25 make up 25% of the sexually active population but the rate of them contracting is disproportionately high. By teaching teens accurate information, they have more knowledge to make safer decisions. Medically accurate information has been shown to have a higher influence than no sex education at all or abstinence-until-marriage education.

It is also important that we do not just teach about heterosexual intercourse, but have an LGBTQ inclusive curriculum. The lack of awareness and information about the LGBTQ community leads to teens and adults who don't know how to have safe same-sex intercourse. A surprising amount of people don't know what a dental dam is. It's a protection from STIs when performing oral sex. Furthermore, teaching children about healthy, normal LGBTQ relationships would help normalize same-sex relationships and non-cisgender identities. It is an important component in supporting LGBTQ youth.

In addition, accurate sex education would help defeat the stigma in teens (specifically boys) that surrounds menstruation and other natural things that happen to girls and boys during puberty. Because of society's influence, many people end up believing that normal, healthy processes are bad or gross. This can cause bullying, low self esteem, or abuse. Sex education would help normalize these natural occurrences. That is why the government should require all public schools to have medically accurate sex education classes.

While it would be a difficult and long process, the outcome would be worth the effort. Many people are against this idea, under beliefs that kids shouldn't be exposed to the world yet or for religious reasons, however by shielding them from the truth parents ensure that their children have less knowledge and information to rely on when they reach adulthood. Typically in schools that teach sex education, they start in middle school. I feel that it is a good starting point for schools. The law would have to be changed at a federal level, so that it affects the whole nation. This would be a tedious process, however I believe it would bring a much needed improvement for American youths.

## **Isabelle Chen (Oxbow High School, Freshman)**

As everyone starts to shift into the next decade, there is one prominent issue that can no longer be silenced. This problem not only applies to Americans but includes every living species who wanders this earth. Despite our state of ignorance, earth has continuously given us telltale signs that climate change is quickly altering our planet. Yet many of us still refuse to see the consequences that climate change has created thus far. Unstable air quality, increase in hotter temperatures, and the rise of sea levels are a few of the repercussions that mankind has generated. Before we can solve other pressing matters like gun control or inequality, we must make global warming our top priority, for it is destroying the very ground we stand on.

According to NASA, the exploitation of fossil fuels is the main driving force in the production of atmospheric carbon dioxide. The action of burning fossil fuels leads to the consolidation of carbon and oxygen in the air to forge CO<sub>2</sub>. The depositing of excess CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere is solely based upon human activities. We lack the action needed from the government to prevent such happenings. Additional grants and federal funding should go towards companies whose mission is to use sustainable energy sources. Those companies will improve further with the increased funding and influence others to reject coal and oil for the more sustainable utilization of solar energy, geothermal energy, hydroelectric energy, etc. The cessation of fossil fuel use will decrease stock and mass production for oil and coal companies, ultimately weakening the usage of greenhouse gases.

What also needs special attention drawn to is the deliberation of entering America back into the Paris Climate Agreement. The agreement states that all countries signed into the arrangement will focus their efforts on the prevention of global warming and greenhouse gas emissions. Nearly 200 countries plus the European Union are currently in the agreement. If America joins back into the Paris Agreement, not only would we be establishing trust and a working relationship alongside other countries, but America would be delivering a message to all citizens living in it that fighting climate change is crucial to the outcome of our future. Not to mention, the United States is one of the most vigorous advocates for climate action. We must not abandon our efforts now in a time like this.

The world cannot prosper with the threat of climate change looming over our heads. In the words of President Obama, "Climate change is no longer some far-off problem; it is happening here, and it is happening now." Denial of the present and our own ignorance to believe the earth will fix itself will simply not stand. Acknowledging that climate change is legitimate would be an essential element in hindering the ongoing growth of global warming. Switching over to viable energy sources and providing government funding to sustainable corporations will decrease the advancements of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by a large sum. This is our planet, and we must protect our only home.



## **Samuel Dooley (Milton High School, Senior)**

The country that we live in today is plagued with fundamental problems. Ranging from political corruption to an inefficient healthcare system, yet the single most important issue facing our country today is nationwide environmental neglect. Without extreme actions being taken immediately, more irreversible damage will be done.

In 2018, the United States emitted 6.5 billion metric tons of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. This is an estimated 8.8% more than 1990. Between 1990 and 2010, the United States lost 949,750 acres of forest on average per year. The U.S. Department of Energy estimates that 1.9 million gallons of oil are spilled into U.S. oceans every year.

Current studies show that the effects of climate change are more severe and are moving faster than was formerly predicted. What needs to happen is large scale environmental programs with legal incentives such as tax breaks, as well as punishments for not adhering to the plans like jail time and loss of government funding or subsidies. The most accurate proposal of recent years is the Green New Deal. This proposal called for a World War 2 type mobilization of the country to achieve 100% clean energy by 2030. This plan also looked to better the economy by creating jobs in sustainable industries, unlike jobs currently involved in fossil fuel industries, as well as investing in renewable public transportation and clean organic agriculture. The first step to combating climate change would be to immediately adopt this proposal, yet in March of 2019 the proposal was rejected by a Republican controlled Senate.

The very first step that should be taken is the readmittance of the U.S. into the Paris Climate Agreement. It is the duty of the United States to set an example for the rest of the world about how to combat climate change. An important idea is to make environmental agencies as nonpartisan as possible, similar to the NLRB where the members consist of nearly equal Republicans as well as Democrats at all times. This would ensure that decisions are made based on science instead of based on party ties and political affiliations.

The most important goal being to make the United States completely carbon neutral. A plan for most, if not all, energy produced to come from clean sources would be necessary to achieving that goal. Another necessity would be the implementation of programs designed to restore forests and wildlife. This would mean increased regulation on logging industries as well as oil industries. With an increased punishment for violating these regulations. These initiatives would be able to transition Americans losing their jobs in fossil fuel industries into clean energy industries, which would be a sustainable alternative. Green jobs would have higher job security than fossil fuels due to the fact that there is a finite amount of coal and oil available to be extracted, once the planet no longer has these resources available all of these millions of workers will lose their jobs with no replacement. With a program like the Green New Deal, these workers will have jobs that do not have an expiration date. It is important to remember that those first and most heavily affected by this crisis, are people with lower incomes. This is not only an environmental issue, but also a human rights issue.

It is up to all of us now to be able to preserve this planet and create a stable system which will allow all generations moving forward to prosper in a healthy environment.

## **Meredith Jackson (Burlington High School, Freshman)**

One issue in Vermont that doesn't get enough recognition is the cost of eating healthy. It isn't affordable for many, and the expenses can even discourage people to eat healthily. If the prices are discouraging people to eat healthily, then they might resort to unhealthy foods because they are cheaper and in more of the average price range for most.

Healthy Living and City Market both have a goal to provide local farm-fresh produce including prep items for healthy, nourishing, meals, and a selection of ingredients to cook vegan or gluten-free meals. Healthy living and City Market are great in that they provide fresh local produce, and for the quality that it is the prices make sense. On the Healthy Living website, the price for a container of raspberries can range anywhere from \$4.29 - \$5.69. That may not seem like a lot but at McDonald's, you can get an entire meal for that much. That is just what many people choose to do, resort to cheaper options such as fast food.

Unlike fresh produce and wholegrain-rich foods, fast food is quick, easy, and very cheap, making it ideal for people who can't afford to shop at places like city Market or Healthy living.

According to Gallup, 80% of Americans eat fast food on at least a monthly basis, and 96% of Americans eat fast food annually. Fast food isn't bad unless a person has it often, say at least once a week. Eating unhealthy foods, too often, can cause people to become overweight or even obese. Over 99,000,000 adults in the U.S. are overweight and over 70,000,000 are obese.

Obesity can cause many health issues that could have been prevented if that person were of a healthy weight. Some risks include high blood pressure, diabetes, gout, breathing problems, such as sleep apnea and asthma, Gallbladder disease and gallstones, Osteoarthritis, Heart disease, stroke, and even cancer. Maintaining a healthy weight and lifestyle will reduce the risk of many of these health problems.

It's not guaranteed that people become obese overtime because healthy food is too expensive, eating unhealthily isn't the only factor that causes obesity, but it could very well be. If healthier foods were cheaper, it would be an option for more people and would encourage them to eat healthier reducing the risk of obesity. Having the availability of healthy meals is important.

A healthy diet is beneficial to your everyday life in so many ways. Some benefits to eating healthy are a maintained/healthy weight, reduced risk of chronic illnesses such as cardiovascular disease and cancer, more energy, and an increase in happiness. Also, a recent study has proven that having a diet consisting of plenty of fruits and vegetables and limits highly processed food, can reduce certain signs of depression.

This issue is very real and very important but thinking up solutions to this problem can be quite the challenge. There are a few solutions that seem doable and not too farfetched or unrealistic.

First, expanding the fresh produce area in stores like Hannafords to give more options and kind of push out some of the unhealthy, overly processed items in the store. This wouldn't necessarily make it less expensive but having more options might encourage people to shop in that section more often.

Second, doing some more advertising for the Farm Share Program. The Farm Share Program provides limited-income Vermonters with access to high-quality produce on a weekly basis. The

program helps hundreds of families get access to a season's worth of farm-fresh produce by reducing the cost of the shares. The program itself is already a solution to this problem, but I feel like advertising would be good because it would inform more people that they have that option. All they have to do is sign up.

Third, and last, is more of something people could do themselves or with a group of people, but people could start their own gardens or start a larger neighborhood garden. This would provide people with plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables. All they would have to do is chip in a little hard work and time, then they could have all the free produce that was grown.

Eating healthy is expensive because a lot of work goes into growing, and getting, that local farm-fresh produce into stores. Farmers spend countless hours growing the crops from which it all comes from, people need to pick, sort, and wash everything, then, there is packaging and delivering. The list goes on. Another part is due to the fact that it is high quality, locally grown, and fresh. A lot of money goes into providing it, so a lot of money needs to be made in order for them to keep providing the produce to stores for everyone. The problem is big, the solutions are limited, but something needs to be done in order to provide farm-fresh products to the people of Vermont at a more reasonable and affordable price.

## **Caleb Matosky (Rice Memorial High School, Junior)**

As citizens of one of the wealthiest nations in the world, we have an inherent responsibility to set an example for others to follow. America has failed to take action and address what is perhaps the greatest threat our world has faced since the beginning of recorded history: climate change. If Americans continue to deny its effects, the future of our country will be put into jeopardy. Rising sea levels, more severe weather events, rampant wildfires, devastating droughts, and disappearing winters are just a few of the effects of climate change we are already experiencing. Skeptics and deniers might argue that America is taking enough action to fight global warming: this sort of lazy and selfish thinking is what has caused the American people and our government to allow climate change to occur uninhibited until the very end of the last century. If our government does not make drastic changes within the next several years, America as we know it could be forever changed. We have the money, we have the ability to implement changes, and all that remains is for lawmakers to place the future of our planet over their allegiance to fossil fuels.

I propose widespread legislation to ensure that America is powered by 80% renewable energy by 2030, which would be a large step in the right direction for the future of our planet. We need to penalize those who profit off of destroying the environment through fossil fuels, as these energy producers produce more emissions per day than many people produce in a year. Through new laws which put a price on CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, and government tax relief for those who produce renewable power, we can work to rid the earth of harmful coal burning. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, coal fueled power generation produces 1.15 billion tons of CO<sub>2</sub> each year. It is also the most carbon rich fossil fuel, producing 2.5 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> per ton of coal burned. Despite this, coal is still being used as the primary source of energy in America. This needs to change. Additionally, we need to take action to crack down on other nations who disregard the state of the world's climate, and ensure that nations such as China and India take responsibility for their role in the issue.

The United States is the wealthiest nation in the world, and if only a fraction of our military budget was used to invest in the future of our environment, the future of younger generations and the future of our species as a whole we might be able to prevent many of climate change's worst effects. There is no time left to wait, or to deny the challenges before us: we must take urgent action and do everything we can to lower CO<sub>2</sub> emissions before it is too late.

## **Ethan Mello (Woodstock Union High School, Junior)**

I believe that the most pressing issue facing our country today is the issue of affordable healthcare. This issue is unique to the United States among developed nations, but for years we have refused to take action. Not only could switching to a universal healthcare system lower costs, but could also ensure that, like the rest of the countries in the modernized world, the US insures all of its citizens as a human right.

A universal healthcare system is a system where all of the inhabitants of a country are guaranteed healthcare at no cost. The government pays for all medical bills, and the system makes sure that even the poor can be helped when they get sick. Government paying for healthcare means higher taxes, but no deductible costs. This system is a staple in most European countries, as well as in Canada. The US is one of the only major countries to not yet adopt this system. In fact, out of the 33 developed countries recognized by The Balance financial website, 32 have universal healthcare. The UN has accepted universal healthcare as the best choice for countries, and has a goal of worldwide universal healthcare coverage by 2030. If the US keeps its current healthcare system, they are unlikely to meet this goal.

In our country the healthcare system is structured so that private companies provide insurance. However, his insurance often doesn't encompass drug prices or certain other costs, and is not affordable by the poor. The US has a Medicaid system for some low income citizens, but this program does not apply to everyone who is unable to consistently pay for healthcare this has led to over 30 million Americans choosing not to purchase healthcare, a dangerous choice if they get sick or need emergency operations. Our system also allows insurance companies to jack up prices to make profit, and allows prescription drug companies to charge outrageous amounts for cheap pills. The US had the highest insurance costs relative to GDP in the world. This cost has not made our life expectancy better either, as in that respect we are still worse off than we should be as the most powerful country in the world.

Universal healthcare has proven very effective when it has been used in other countries. Universal healthcare lowers healthcare costs, and eliminates administrative costs due to the fact that it is completely run by one entity, the government. In the United States this lower cost of healthcare could not only boost the economy, but also allow for more social mobility for the lower class, and less earnings for the billionaire drug company executives.

Changing the healthcare system of the United States to universal healthcare will not be an easy task, but it is one that is necessary for the good of our country as well as the people in it. In the next election, we need to ensure we elect politicians who not only support universal healthcare, but are willing to fight for it.

## **Salama Mbilizi (Winooski High School)**

“Why should we study for a future that is being taken away from us? We demand a safe future is that really too much to ask?” asks climate activist Greta Thunberg. This young Swedish environmentalist has gained international attention for her concerns about climate change.

I am a girl from Africa who came to the U.S. as a refugee and I don't want to become a "climate refugee," like people in California who have lost homes due to fire. Climate change first created droughts in California, which lasted over a decade according to Climate Central. There is an 80 percent chance of a multi-decade-long drought by 2100.

Human activities, such as burning fossil fuels, cause climate change. Exhaust gases from cars, uncontrolled factory releases, burning of low-quality coal for heating, even airplanes and ships create air pollution. We should reduce the use of oil and gas, and use alternative energy sources such as wind and solar power.

The government should start investing more in public transportation, which can reduce greenhouse gas emissions because fewer people will have to drive and we can reduce air pollution. According to Energy News Network, “Public transit produces significantly less air pollution per passenger mile than a standard car carrying a single driver. Buses emit 20% less carbon monoxide, 10% as much hydrocarbons, and 75% as much nitrogen oxides per passenger mile than an automobile with a single occupant.” Smarter public transportation will increase ridership, cut the number of cars on the road, reduce traffic, and lower greenhouse gas emissions. We could also recycle more plastics and stop cutting down forests. Unless we change our behaviors, global warming will continue and we will continue to experience weather extremes, forest fires, and massive pollution.

When 195 nations met in 2015, they agreed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions as part of the landmark Paris Agreement. The United States later backed out of that agreement but states and cities are still interested. I call on Congress to pass and support legislation to help our environment by honoring the Paris Agreement!

I have a personal interest because climate change affects my life as well as our planet. If we don't change our behavior, we will suffer and some of us will die. Already, animals are going extinct at an alarming rate, reducing the balance in our world and the quality of our life.

Scientists say that if we don't stop pollution and greenhouse gases, Earth will be here for only a few hundred years. But if we can reduce greenhouse gases, Earth can remain okay for a million more years. Think about what will happen to us, your children and grandchildren. I want to be here for as many years as I can, enjoying this world I live in.

## **Patrick Meskill (Essex High School, Junior)**

~Vaccines Cause Adults~

The law dictates a child as property until the age of 18. While this is usually for the good of the child, what does it mean for the fate of children with misinformed parents? Anti-vax is a deadly philosophy of being against vaccinations, a philosophy that gets children killed. While yes, children are protected from abuse and neglect under Child Protective Services, there is no law to protect them from their own parent's ideas. Parents can avoid federally required vaccines under religious or superstitious reasons in 45 of the 50 states (NCSL). However, when the safety of the public is at stake, the anti-vax culture becomes a truly worldwide epidemic.

The confusion comes from a defrocked former doctor, Andrew Wakefield, who first proposed the vaccine/autism connection (Ruth). The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) did an inquiry in 2001 to address the accusations, and found no connection to autism in vaccines. Another complaint isolated the mercury in vaccines. Vaccines contain small amounts of mercury to form thimerosal, a preservative. These small amounts aren't any more than the amount in 3 ounces of tuna fish. Nonetheless, the FDA attempted lowering the amount of mercury in vaccines, but still saw no relief in rising autism numbers. In 2004, 10 out of the 13 authors on Wakefield's paper retracted their hypothesis (Mayor). Then in 2010, the medical journal "The Lancet" retracted Wakefield's paper, calling several elements incorrect. America can now agree vaccines should be made mandatory (Dyer).

Medical marvels have continued to raise humanity to higher levels of immunity, causing fatal diseases to go nearly extinct. These include measles, mumps, rubella, polio, chickenpox, and smallpox. However, they still remain only "nearly extinct." Modern day preventable diseases have yet to fade from America due to anti-vax. One study performed in 1982, watched 25 vaccinated and 25 unvaccinated children for the first 5 years of their lives. The result? One vaccinated child had mild measles but didn't die, while the unvaccinated children saw 14 deaths by measles and one of tetanus (Epoke). The Center for Disease Control and Prevention reports that 2018 has had more measles outbreaks than any year this decade, and they typically start in unvaccinated groups (CDC).

Vaccines should be mandatory. Schools have begun to act on this already by requiring their students to be vaccinated to attend. In Australia, parents will be charged every 2 weeks A\$28 (roughly 20 USD) for having unvaccinated children, per child (Pasha-Robinson). These laws are something that should be present in the United States. The flu shot is already absolutely free with most health insurances, showing how recommended it is. This science has been around for a long time, and only recently, thanks to the internet's easily accessible misinformation, has it been verbally contested. We must make vaccines mandatory to protect our country from preventable diseases. Yours or someone else's life may depend on it.

## **Madelyn Trimpi (Woodstock Union High School, Junior)**

Plastic is destroying the earth and a federal law to restrict single-use plastics must be developed. Plastic is a huge contributor to climate change and greenhouse gas emissions that are warming the atmosphere. An article called “How Plastics Contribute to Climate Change” by Brooke Bauman from Yale Climate Connections states “plastic originates as fossil fuels and emits greenhouse gasses from cradle to grave.” At the beginning of its life cycle, gas and oil are fracked from the ground, then made into plastic releasing harmful pollutants like CO<sub>2</sub> and nitrogen oxide that get stuck in the atmosphere and warm the earth. Along with greenhouse gas emissions, plastic pollutes the ecosystems by simply entering and never leaving. In the same article by Yale, scientists state “plastics can break down into smaller pieces called microplastics through biodegradation or exposure to the sun, heat or water. These microplastics scatter to all corners of the globe and even to the depths of the oceans. Toxic chemicals can bind micro-plastics and create poison pills that marine animals eat” When a foreign substance enters the ecosystem, it threatens all aspects of the life cycle; Including humans.

Biodiversity is the root of life on earth and when exposed to something like plastic, everything feels an effect. For example, research shows that plastic has entered into the human body most likely through food like fish and other meats. Animals eat the microplastics thinking they are nutrients; we eat the fish, therefore consuming the plastic in them. This can lead to many health issues. Studies show that an average of 20 particles of microplastic has been found in 10 grams of human stool. “If our findings are remotely representative, annual microplastic consumption could exceed several hundred thousand [particles],” authors of the Environmental Science and Technology concludes. Even in cases when physical plastics pose little to no risk to human health, potentially harmful chemicals are added to plastics to modify appearance or functionality. Some of these chemicals include BPA and phthalates which have each been found to disrupt hormones in humans. BPA has been linked to increasing the risk of birth defects, metabolic diseases, and other health problems. Among other health risks, phthalate exposure has been found to reduce testosterone levels in male fetuses.

Already, states including California, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Maine, New York, Oregon, and Vermont—have successfully banned single-use plastic bags. In addition to banning plastic bags, Vermont's SB 113 will place restrictions on single-use straws and polystyrene containers. These few states are leading the initiative in a fight against an indestructible material. When it comes to plastic, there are plenty of realistic alternatives that we should be enforcing instead of fighting against it. Developing and making these alternative products affordable and more readily available is a necessary focus in working toward a more healthy environment. Plastic is a major contributor to climate change. A national ban on single-use plastic is a simple start and necessary step toward saving the future of our planet.



## **Griffin Waryas (Bellows Falls Union High School, Senior)**

Ninety-Seven years ago, Frederick Banting discovered insulin. However, he decided not to put his name on the patent; he believed it was against the Hippocratic Oath to profit at the expense of patients. So, his team sold the patent to the University of Toronto for a dollar, in hopes that anyone who needed the medicine could afford it. Yet, today, ninety-seven years since the patent was sold for one dollar, people are dying because they cannot afford the insulin they need to survive.

Nicole Smith-Holt's son Alec died because of this. When his 26th birthday hit, he was no longer covered by his parent's insurance, and his monthly insulin costs skyrocketed to a staggering \$1,300 a month. (CBS) Alec could no longer afford his medicine and passed away shortly after.

Unfortunately, this isn't an incredibly rare case. The costs of the most popular types of insulin have tripled over the past decade, the average cost per month has risen to \$450 a month, and 1 in 4 diabetes patients now either is forced to take partial doses or skip over their life-saving medicine. (Belluz) Unfortunately, Insulin is not the only drug being used as a profit machine by corporate monsters.

In 2007, Mylan bought the rights to the EpiPen device. At that time, the cost of a set of two injectors was \$94. A little over a decade later, the cost is over \$700. ("Home.") And with 3.6 million prescriptions being written last year, and the net price to make a set being \$60 (It's Jaw-Dropping), Mylan made about 2.3 BILLION dollars in profit. They know people will buy it regardless of price because they have to. This leaves the life of uninsured, poor individuals in the balance.

To fix this, these large pharmaceutical companies need to be trust busted. They are buying off competition and abusing the broken American health care system to pad their pockets at the expense of the working class. Not to mention, they have teamed up with the insurance companies to ensure profit at every corner. While these companies are businesses and should be allowed to operate as such, there comes a time when the government must protect us from them. As the great Teddy Roosevelt once said, "We draw the line against misconduct, not against wealth."

We need to employ the trust-busting laws set up in this nation to prevent these monopolies from preying on our citizens. To do this, we need to take the corruption out of Washington. In the time between January 1st, 2017 and October 16th, 2018, 34 lawmakers received at least \$100,000 including the House Republican majority leader. (Huetteman) Drug companies should be banned from funding campaigns to prevent the purchasing of their economic safety. Another law that should be employed is a "Sensible Drug Pricing Act" This would allow the companies to continue to make money but also allow poor Americans access to drugs that are relatively cheap to make, with a control on the pricing.

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## **Kyle Wilkin (Missisquoi Valley Union High School, Junior)**

Every day people experience struggle of some sort; they struggle in a class or have to work harder than anticipated to complete a goal, but some people struggle more than others. Working hard, people may find it impossible to improve; there may be something blocking their way or restricting their ability to complete a task. In situations like that people search for help; they turn to the people around them hoping to find support, so oftentimes people either find support, or they find indifference. When people's basic needs aren't met, they are left to fend for themselves. In the United States there are "A total of 552,830 people were experiencing homelessness on a single night in 2018" (National Alliance to End Homelessness). People who are homeless are in need of people to support them.

The first potential solution could be to allocate more money to fund social workers to help homeless people. Working with people who are homeless, social workers will be able to help them find housing. According to the Congressional Budget Office, in 2018 \$623 billion were spent on defense; if some amount of that money was given to the comparatively low amount of \$93 billion spent on education, training, employment, and social services combined, more people could work with those who are homeless to find housing. By making more social workers available, people who are homeless will be able to more easily access support.

The second solution would be to support Housing First. Housing First is "centered on the belief that everyone can achieve stability in permanent housing directly from homelessness and that stable housing is the foundation for pursuing other health and social services goals" (United States Interagency Council on Homelessness). Housing First is a way to find people, who are in need of it, permanent housing while giving them the support they need. By helping people find permanent housing, they are able to continue their lives and pursue goals that will not be available if they did not have housing.

The third potential solution is making mental health facilities more available for homeless people. According to a survey done in 2015 by The Department of Housing and Urban Development, "25 percent of the American homeless—140,000 individuals—were seriously mentally ill at any given point in time. Forty-five percent of the homeless—250,000 individuals—had any mental illness". A serious mental illness is defined as "a disruption in normal thinking, feeling, mood, behavior, interpersonal interactions, or daily functioning" (Merriam-Webster). By making mental health facilities more available and destigmatized for homeless people, they will be better equipped to live and be successful on their own. Homeless people need the help and support of those around them; by giving people who are homeless options and the support they need they will be able to start to support themselves and find permanent housing.