

REBECCA GREEN, ST. JOHNSBURY ACADEMY  
SOPHOMORE (FINALIST)

I believe that one of the most pressing issues that is facing our nation today is the conservative movement to remove federal funding from Planned Parenthood. I think that this is very important, because Planned Parenthood clinics are key providers not only of family planning services, but also preventative care, and other important health care services for low income women and families, and therefore, defunding this organization would negatively impact access to healthcare in these vulnerable socio-economic groups.

The movement to defund Planned Parenthood is centered primarily on ideological and political reasons surrounding the pro-life movement and their argument that tax dollars should not be allowed to support organizations that provide abortions. Yet, Planned Parenthood data demonstrated that only 3% of their budget goes to fund abortion, with the rest of their funds going to contraceptive services (31%), testing and treatment of STD's (45%), other women's health care services (14%), and screening and prevention of cancer (7%). According to a report from the Guttmacher Institute, in 2014, Planned Parenthood prevented 2.2 million unintended pregnancies and averted many cases of sexual transmitted diseases, and cervical and breast cancer through screening PAP smears and mammograms and HPV tests and vaccinations, resulting in a net public savings of \$13.6 billion, or \$7.09 for every public dollar spent. Defunding Planned Parenthood clinics could therefore have a significant negative impact on both these health benefits and the health care savings that come from their services.

An example of the effects of this movement to defund Planned Parenthood can be seen in the case of Texas, where cutting federal funding to this organization led to closure of more than 80 clinics and deprived thousands of low-income women of highly effective contraceptive methods, resulting in a drastic increase in the rate of births covered by Medicaid.

In conclusion, Planned Parenthood has created a nationwide network of clinics that provide a wide breadth of services to low income women and families who often fall in the gap between Medicaid and insurance coverage. Efforts to defund this organization would deprive this vulnerable socio-economic group from important health care services, and cause profound negative impact, not just on preventative care and overall women's health, but on state and national health care spending.

ABIGAIL HALNON, MILTON HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR  
(FINALIST)

My fellow Americans, I am humbled and thrilled to be your president. I believe that the American people are generous, insightful, and accepting. Our nation gains its power, strength, and beauty from its diversity. We strive, as a nation, to be an international leader in perpetuating ideals of freedom and equality. It is my concern that there are many acts in this country that violate these fundamental beliefs.

It is important that the United States is a country recognized as a pioneer of social justice on a worldwide stage. It is our moral duty to uphold the highest standards of equality and acceptance. We have made great steps towards this in recent years. The landmark Supreme Court decision in 2015 of Obergefell v. Hodges upheld the fundamental right to marry, regardless of sex. We must further prove our nation's belief in freedom and opportunity by the legislation that we pass. There is progress yet to be made.

Currently, practicing conversion therapy on gay and bisexual Americans is widely per-

mitted across the U.S. This is a process under which non-heterosexual people are subjected to various means to reverse their sexual orientation. Conversion therapy, based on a scientifically discredited premise, must see an immediate ban. It permits the means to punish and abuse innocent Americans. The vast majority of these victims are minors. This practice perpetuates a false and violent belief system that homosexuality is a mental disease and that a cure must be sought. It is an obscene violation of the basic human rights of gay, lesbian, and bisexual Americans. It should not be permitted by law.

Although it receives little public support, only 5 states have banned conversion therapy on minors. These acts of hate and misinformation must be outlawed nationwide. It is an injustice and a crime to subject torture on Americans, most often minors, who have committed no offense. An immediate country-wide ban must take place.

We must work to defy all accounts of prejudice based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The freedom and mobility of transgender and nonbinary Americans is severely limited. Their rights and protection are being eroded by current legislation. A recent law in North Carolina known as the "bathroom bill" allows regulation of bathroom access for transgender individuals. Legislation that regulates bathroom use by transgender Americans is an act of hate and tragic misinformation. Rates of violence or misconduct by transgender individuals in bathrooms are so unprecedented that there are virtually no statistics on it. There is no need for regulation. These laws must immediately be struck down. These are basic and necessary rights and they must not be infringed upon. Discriminatory acts based on sexuality and gender identity have implications outside of their specific goals. The use of U.S. law to marginalize any group perpetuates dangerous and violent beliefs. Our misunderstanding cannot become rejection. Our fear cannot manifest into anger.

Americans will not stand for the perpetuation of hate, fear, and misinformation. We will not reject our neighbors and our friends. Our country must make these necessary steps towards true equality.

KARLEY ZIER, MISSISQUOI VALLEY UNION HIGH  
SCHOOL JUNIOR (FINALIST)

Raising the price of minimum wage would benefit everyone differently, but all in a commendable way. This would give people on government assistance more of an incentive to secure a job. It would keep the average family of four from drowning in debt just to buy groceries for the week. According to Sherrod Brown, Senator of Ohio, "Anyone who's tried to pay a heating bill, fill a prescription, or simply buy groceries knows all too well that the current minimum wage does not cut the mustard." Sherrod explains exactly how tough it is to try and survive off from the ongoing minimum wage price.

Minimum wage in Vermont should be raised for a multitude of reasons. One way the state could benefit from this would be the amount of people withdrawing from welfare and other government funded programs. The state could benefit from this act because unemployed rates would go down with more people applying for jobs. Families living off of minimum wage have barely enough money to meet their basic needs per week or per month. Someone making minimum wage at \$9.60 an hour for eight hours a day and five days a week will earn \$384. Therefore, one will make \$1,536 per month without any taxes being taken out. According to USA Today, the average cost of groceries per week for a family of four is \$150-\$200. The average cost of rent in Vermont is \$900 per

month. Being left with \$436, which would be non-existent due to taxes, leaves no room to pay for other needs or necessities. People wouldn't have money to pay for phone bills, transportation expenses, or daycare because one would be working. Someone would not be able to pay for any of these necessities because of the fact they wouldn't be able to afford them living off of minimum wage.

People who are using government assistance programs could benefit from this because there would be a reason for them to want to work. If people make the same amount off of welfare as they are making while working a forty hour job each week, of course they are going to choose welfare, or other government assistance programs. There is no incentive for the people on welfare to want to get a job with the minimum wage being so low and having to pay for expenses they wouldn't need to pay for while being unemployed. The other people in the state could benefit from this by the amount of people withdrawing from the welfare program. The more people who withdraw from the system, the less tax money that one say to pay to fund these types of programs. Overall, those are the reasons why the minimum wage in Vermont should be raised.●

#### MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

A message from the President of the United States was communicated to the Senate by Mr. Pate, one of his secretaries.

#### EXECUTIVE MESSAGE REFERRED

As in executive session the Presiding Officer laid before the Senate a message from the President of the United States submitting a nomination which was referred to the appropriate committees.

(The message received today is printed at the end of the Senate proceedings.)

#### MESSAGE FROM THE HOUSE

At 3:02 p.m., a message from the House of Representatives, delivered by Mr. Novotny, one of its reading clerks, announced that the House has passed the following bills, in which it requests the concurrence of the Senate:

H.R. 7. An act to prohibit taxpayer funded abortions.

H.R. 589. An act to establish Department of Energy policy for science and energy research and development programs, and reform National Laboratory management and technology transfer programs, and for other purposes.

H.R. 600. An act to promote Internet access in developing countries and update foreign policy toward the Internet, and for other purposes.

H.R. 601. An act to enhance the transparency and accelerate the impact of assistance provided under the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 to promote quality basic education in developing countries, to better enable such countries to achieve universal access to quality basic education and improved learning outcomes, to eliminate duplication and waste, and for other purposes.

The message further announced that pursuant to sections 5580 and 5581 of the revised statutes (20 U.S.C. 42-43), and the order of the House of January