This info sheet provides general information about how to perform basic legal research. It is intended to help municipal officials find relevant provisions in Vermont law to instruct their understanding of their statutory duties and authority. For specific questions, members can contact MAC Member Inquiry Service at info@vlct.org.

**SOURCES OF STATE LAW**

Your authority as a municipal official is derived solely from Vermont law. Therefore, it is important to act within the limits of the law and act only when you are authorized to do so by the law. Sources of state law include the written laws passed by the Legislature (statutes), case law (the set of legal principles developed and explained by the Vermont Supreme Court in its written opinions), and the Vermont Constitution. But this is not the end of the story. Other laws – both state and federal – often impact the operation of local government. These laws include administrative regulations promulgated by federal or state agencies, federal statutes and case law, and the United States Constitution.

**Vermont Statutes Annotated**

Most legal research on a municipal issue starts with the Vermont Statutes Annotated. This hardbound compilation of the state statutes is arranged by title and section. A citation to 24 V.S.A. § 2431, for example, refers to *Title 24, Section 2431* of the Vermont Statutes Annotated. Bound copies of the statutes (the “green books”) are typically kept at the town clerk’s office and in public libraries. An electronic version of the state statutes is also maintained by the Legislature.

**Supplements To Vermont Statutes Annotated**

When consulting the statutes, your research is not complete until you find the most current version of the law. To do so, review the same section in the annual supplement, commonly called the “pocket part.” The annual supplement is typically a paper pamphlet, located at the rear of the hardbound book. Sometimes supplements are printed in separate softbound booklets. The Legislature’s electronic version of the statutes is updated every fall after each legislative session has ended. There is no electronic corollary to the published paper supplement to the hardbound versions.

**Recent Legislation**

If there is nothing in the supplement under the title and section number at issue, then the hardbound version is usually the most current version of the statute. However, between the time the Legislature’s annual session ends (usually late May or early June) to when the next annual supplement is published (usually January), it is a good practice to check for any new legislation on the issue you are researching. This is true even when using the electronic version
of the statutes, which are typically not updated until sometime in October. The easiest way to
do this is to review the Vermont Legislative Bill Tracking System.

Finding new legislation can be difficult. While the Legislative Bill Tracking System has a keyword
search tool, if one does not know the proper keywords to use or the bill or Act number, finding
a relevant bill may not be possible. Therefore, during each Legislative session, we suggest that
you also consult both the VLCT Weekly Legislative Report and the annually produced Legislative
Wrap-up, or by calling the League at (800) 649-7915.

State Case Law
Even when the applicable statute is found, the researcher’s task is usually not complete. Below
the text of each statute printed in Vermont Statutes Annotated, there often appear, in smaller
print, one or more annotations. These annotations are brief summaries (but not quotes) of
Vermont Supreme Court cases that interpret the statute. Not every statute has annotations
because not every statute has been interpreted by the Supreme Court. The Legislature’s
electronic version of the statutes does not have any annotations. Although annotations can
help you understand how the statute has been interpreted, a thorough legal researcher will not
rely on them completely. The annotations are only case summaries; they are not actual
statements of law. To get the final word, you must review the actual case.

Finding published cases can be difficult. The Vermont Supreme Court publishes its written
opinions. The website is scheduled for weekly update, but that schedule is inconsistent. The
same website also publishes Vermont Superior Court (including Environmental Court) written
opinions, but those cases are often published to the website well after the court decisions have
been issued.

For additional case law research options, one can look to a subscription based online service
(e.g., Lexis or Westlaw), or any of the free online legal research engines such as the Legal
Information Institute (https://www.law.cornell.edu/) or Justia. You can also check with your
local public library or the Superior and/or District Court in your county. Those in the
Washington County area can visit the Vermont Supreme Court law library in Montpelier.

Deciphering the Code: Understanding Case Law Citation. The annotations in Vermont Statutes
Annotated are written in the following format: Town of Brookline v. Town of Newfane, 126 Vt.
179, 224 A.2d 908, (Vt. 1966). Here is the key to deciphering the code:

- “Town of Brookline v. Town of Newfane”: is the title of the case. The first party listed
  “Town of Brookline” is the plaintiff - the party that first sued. The second party listed
  “Town of Newfane” is the defendant – the party that was sued.
- “126 Vt. 179”: “126” is the volume number of the series where the court’s complete
  written opinion is published. “Vt.” stands for Vermont Reports (published by West
  Publishing), the reporter, or court case series, containing the opinion. “179” is the
  page number in volume 126 where the case begins.
• “224 A.2d 908”: “224” is the volume number of another series where the court’s complete written opinion is published. “A.2d” stands for Atlantic Reports Second (a regional compilation of state court cases also published by West Publishing). “908” is the page number in volume 224 of Atlantic Reports Second where the case begins.

• “(Vt. 1966)”: indicates that it was a Vermont Supreme Court decision and the year the decision was issued.

• The party that appeals a case to the Supreme Court (the party dissatisfied with the prior decision) may be either the plaintiff or defendant, and, depending on the ultimate disposition of the case, may end up winning (the decision is “reversed” or “vacated and remanded”) or losing (“affirmed”).

All Vermont Supreme Court decisions after July 1, 2003 are cited differently. Here’s an example: Lakeside Equip. Corp. v. Town of Chester, 2004 VT 84 ¶ 3.

• “2004” is the year the Court decision was issued.

• “VT” denotes that it is a Vermont Supreme Court decision.

• “84” means it’s the 84th opinion issued by the Court that year.

• “¶ 3” means the citation is referencing to the paragraph marked “3” in the body of the text.

**State Regulations**

Other state laws binding on the town include the regulations passed by state administrative agencies (e.g., Agency of Natural Resources, Agency of Transportation, Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets). A complete list of Vermont’s administrative agencies and their respective rules.

**SOURCES OF FEDERAL LAW**

Federal law may also influence local action. Federal statutes are published in the United States Code (U.S.C.). Federal regulations are published in the Code of Federal Regulations (C.F.R.), available at Most federal agencies also maintain their own websites. Helpful resources for Vermont municipal officials include websites maintained by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), IRS, U.S. Forest Service, and the Department of Labor. The Legal Information Institute by Cornell Law School mentioned earlier is a one-stop resource for most of the above materials:

For Vermont federal district court opinions and rules, visit the United States District Court’s website. Opinions are available at the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit (which covers Vermont, New York, and Connecticut). Click here for United States Supreme Court opinions.