Greetings from the Green Mountain State! Thank you NAAG and NAGTRI for inviting me to participate in the “Chief of the Month” Club to share a little about myself and the exciting work that General Donovan and our office are doing on behalf of Vermont consumers. I confess that I love this series because it provides a glimpse into what motivates you and your offices, the issues you’re working on and it gives me ideas. So, thank you for all you do to bring justice and progress to your constituents. In doing so for your state and its citizens, you inspire creativity and action in other jurisdictions as well.

I grew up in Vermont. This brave little state has given me everything. So, I feel a special obligation to pursue a life of public service. I joined the office in 2017 after more than a decade representing low-income Vermonters at Vermont Legal Aid. While there, I represented clients in a wide variety of civil matters: housing/evictions, public benefits, and family court matters (relief from abuse cases). My vision for legal services work was to bring impact litigation and marry it to public policy initiatives and public education and outreach. We had a lot of success: challenging (and changing) the laws relating to water shut-offs to tenants, the evictions process generally, preserving access to public benefits, and strengthening our state’s “rent-to-own” laws, among many others.

Vermont Attorney General T.J. Donovan is especially concerned about social and economic justice – so consumer matters are always a priority for this office. We had worked together in the past on projects designed to alleviate the disproportionate impacts of poverty on low-income Vermonters. So, I was honored when he asked me to join his team to head up the Public Protection Division (which includes our Consumer/Anti-trust Unit and our Civil Rights Unit).

Mostly, I am lucky to work with a creative, resourceful group of colleagues who are working hard every day to protect Vermonters through effective, robust enforcement action, and who are dedicated to prevention through outreach and education. Together this talented team of attorneys, investigators, and support staff tackle the myriad priorities of the Vermonters we serve:
enforcing our consumer protection act and antitrust laws to protect our citizens from scams and unfair or deceptive practices and to ensure a fair marketplace. And, we promote Vermont values at the state and federal level.

Here are a few examples of the work I’m proud our team has accomplished: We’re delivering on the Attorney General’s promise to take on the opioid epidemic in our state. We have filed complaints against the manufacturers, principals, and distributors of opioids to bring justice to Vermonters affected by the scourge of addiction. And, last year our office resolved years of diligent enforcement arbitration with big tobacco. The result was a record settlement of those matters for our state – and half of the nearly $30 million settlement was committed to prevention, treatment, and public safety initiatives relating to the opioid epidemic.

We’re protecting Vermonters from unfair pricing. We recently reached a $1.75 million settlement with Dollar General resolving complaints of inaccurate pricing at their stores. In addition to being one of the largest single-state settlements in the history of our Division, what was remarkable to me was the excellent partnership with our weights and measures inspectors and leadership at the Agency of Agriculture. It was a great example of interagency enforcement teamwork. In addition to the deterrent effect of the penalty, the injunctive terms should ensure that Vermonters are protected in the future.

We also have some great examples of policy initiatives and regulatory reform we can point to: establishing the nation’s first data broker law, for example. Key to this new regulatory approach was establishing a definition for the industry, creating a new term of art for “brokered personal information” and establishing a registry for data brokers to cast sunlight and transparency on an industry that heretofore has been a model of opacity. Now Vermonters can quickly and easily identify data brokers operating in our state, determine whether they can opt out of certain services (and how to do so), and learn what kinds of information are bought and sold. The final legislation was the result of robust public outreach and stakeholder involvement over a two-year period. We also issued guidance to the industry to assist businesses in determining whether the new law applies to them. The future of consumer protection is online. Providing our citizens more information and control over their personal data is central to preserving the twin imperatives of commerce and consumer protection.

Maple runs through the veins of every Vermonter. And, Vermont led an aggressive campaign to push back on proposed rules that would have forced a new labeling requirement on our maple industry (and honey producers, for that matter). The FDA had proposed requiring an “added sugar” declaration for certain products, including single ingredient products like 100% pure maple syrup and honey. Our office launched a web portal through our Consumer Assistance Program (housed at the University of Vermont) to make commenting on the proposed rules easy for Vermonters. Just two weeks before the comment period closed, over 3,000 Vermonters weighed in. And the FDA listened. The agency issued a statement indicating it would reconsider the onerous and misleading labeling requirement – and subsequently Congress resolved the issue once and for all by exempting 100% pure single ingredient products in the farm bill. We gave people a voice and Vermont citizens made a difference. The outcome was a win for common sense, fair and accurate labeling, and for our small business community.
In addition to our Consumer Assistance Program (CAP) which provides help to Vermont consumers, we provide education and information to small business “consumers” – last year we partnered with the Vermont Department of Health in a “Landlord Restoration” initiative bringing lead-safe housing education to scores of landlords across five communities with the highest incidence of reported elevated blood lead levels in children. Together, increased compliance with our lead safety laws which in turn protects the health and safety of our kids.

Attorney General Donovan speaks often about the importance of building a “culture of compliance” in our state. By practicing our values in the courthouse, in the legislature, and on Main Street we are doing just that. We are grateful to all of you for your leadership and partnership in this shared endeavor.