

Good Morning,

Ms. Ayer

Ms. Lyons

Mr. McCormack

Mr. Pollina

I want to start by thanking you for your time and for giving me the opportunity to speak to you on Bill S. 219 regarding the regulation of Sober Houses by the State of Vermont. I especially want to thank Mr. Pollina, and Representatives Tom Stevens and Rebecca Ellis for taking the time to visit our Sober House in Waterbury this summer. I am grateful for their due diligence as I am sure it has paved the way for our interaction today.

My name is David Riegel. I grew up in Washington County but have lived and worked in Chittenden County for the last 12 years. For 7 of those last 12 years I have been sober. In principle, I agree with the need for a Bill like this. Our state is facing a public health crisis with addiction. Sober Houses are an extremely effective tool to support those who suffer from the disease of addiction. If the State is serious about a holistic approach to this issue, meaning the enforcement of laws, the availability of treatment for all those who want it, and support for everyone entering and currently in recovery, then Sober Houses will have to be a part of that strategy. Therefore, a means of determining what the basic minimum requirements of a house must be in order to be recognized by the State is in fact necessary. I must say that I believe this bill to be in its infancy. I can't help but wonder why the hundreds of Vermonters who eat, sleep, and breath recovery in both their personal and professional lives haven't been given the opportunity to have their voices heard. While I feel that I have valuable experience and opinions, my voice is one of many who should be given the chance to weigh in on this. Please consider contacting the Vermont Recovery Network and the Vermont Association for Mental Health and Addiction. There are also many individuals who have lived in sober houses who now lead successful productive lives. Their experience should be heard and used to create a bill which will ensure a safe, comfortable, supportive environment for those choosing to live in a substance free home while pursuing their recovery.

I went to inpatient treatment on January 10th 2007. Upon being released there were two options I had for a Sober House and both were full with extensive wait lists. I returned to my apartment and was fortunate to have a roommate who supported my need for a substance free environment. After about a year, with the support and help of my family I was able to start the process of purchasing my own home with the goal of inviting my friends who were serious about sobriety to live with me. I moved into that home on September 25th 2008 and it has been occupied by people in recovery ever since. This

group sober living environment had everything to do with the success of my life today. I learned and helped others learn necessary life skills to become responsible, contributing members of society again. The reality is that many people are not as fortunate as I am. They are forced to live with people who continue to drink or use drugs or return to homeless shelters or worse, the streets. This is not setting an addict in recovery up for success. In fact, it can easily lead to a relapse with extreme consequences. You see, addiction is a deadly disease. Those of us who are in recovery understand the fatal nature of our malady. Therefore, people who suffer from the disease of addiction and come into recovery have a personal motivation to better their lives. They are truly looking for opportunities to help them get well again. Studies have shown that people who have deadly diseases like Cancer or AIDS have a better quality of life and better attitudes toward life when they are supported by others. A sober house gives people in recovery the opportunity to voluntarily live with other like-minded people in a supportive environment. I have seen the difference it makes to have a safe place to live both in myself and countless others. Andrew Gonyea is a friend of mine who was doing a similar thing at a similar time. Over the years we have come together to align our ideas about how to help as many people as we can to have the best chance at recovery as possible. This has led to our involvement and running of 4 Sober Houses in Chittenden County and 1 in Washington County. We are working with former Governor Hoff using parts of his statewide treatment proposal from back in 2006 and again revisited in 2010 and the Vermont Association for Mental Health and Addiction Recovery to discuss how we can make this opportunity available to all Vermonters in recovery who want it. Needless to say, I have some real hands on experience with the things this bill addresses.

We are talking about people's homes. How invasive do you want Government to be? We are having this debate on the national level right now. I believe the goal of this bill should be for the State to set a minimum standard for Sober Houses to meet if they want to be recognized by the State and receive State funding. These standards should be around safety of the structure and commitment to sobriety. A Sober House should have to abide by the same regulations that any other rental property does regarding fire and building safety codes and health codes. A simple example of why I believe the bill needs more work is that it addresses smoke alarms but not CO detectors. Both are necessary for any rental unit in Vermont.

As far as the other sections of the bill, I really believe these things should be left up to the people who are intimately involved with recovery. I can tell you that all our houses are non-smoking, require the involvement in evidence based programming for their addiction, and have curfew policies. We do not admit anyone with a known warrant, and we ourselves are always seeking to develop and improve our ability to support all people who reside in our houses. I don't disagree that these are all good things. My

question is, what do each of these things have to look like to gain approval from the state?

What tools will be in place for those operating a Sober House to know if someone has an outstanding warrant? We are often dealing with very difficult transitions out of corrections or treatment. We do not want to be sending someone out onto the street because we can't determine if they have a warrant or not. I would suggest at least amending the language to read "known warrant". At the point the warrant becomes known the person must deal with it or leave.

There are many different curfew policies depending on what stage of sobriety a person is at and what their life circumstances are. Do we want to prohibit someone from working 3rd shift? Not if they are keeping up with all of their responsibilities and living a sober life. I would suggest the language be amended to read "each house must have and enforce a curfew policy" but leave that policy up to the people managing the house. The goal is to be effective.

What does the training look like for the manager of the Sober House? We have learned a great deal since 2008 and continue to do so. This bill currently calls for training in housing laws, substance abuse treatment, and management. I fail to see how these requirements achieve the actual goal of supporting people in recovery. Why not ask those who are part of the Vermont Association for Mental Health and Addiction Recovery and Vermont Recovery Network to create a training program tailored to Sober Houses. If we are going to do it, let's do it right by involving the people who are the experts at it.

I noticed that the Oxford House Inc. is specifically mentioned in this bill. We have been in touch with them many times over the years and more so in the past few weeks. They are terrific about sharing their experience and providing guidance based on that experience. I am curious to find out why they would be exempt from the regulations in this bill but no other nonprofit organization would be. What makes them different?

My final concern is regarding section c2 stating that parole officers and substance abuse counselors only make referrals to those Sober Houses on the Sates list. Availability is minimal in any Sober House. We currently have relationships with the treatment centers around the state. They don't send people to houses that are not safe and sober living environments. If you want to limit where the States support or funding goes, I understand that. Please do not take any resources away from the people working on the front line of this war.

In conclusion, I'm with you! I think this is an important undertaking and I am excited to be a Vermonter in a time when we are willing to address the growing issue of addiction. I ask you to really think about where this bill comes from and the spirit with which you

intend it to have. First and foremost we want to help people by making safe sober living environments available to all those who want it.

Thank you for your time,

David Riegel