

Mental Health Advocacy Day Testimony for House Corrections and Institutions Committee: Julie Brisson

Good morning. My name is Julie Brisson and I'm the Coordinator of the Wellness Workforce Coalition, a program of the Vermont Center for Independent Living and I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today. The Wellness Workforce Coalition is funded by the Department of Mental Health from Act 79 funding. The Coalition is comprised of 14 peer run organizations with informal participation from peer workers at the designated mental health agencies. The Coalition's mission is to create a statewide group of peer run organizations which supports training and advocacy for Vermont's peer workforce while preserving the autonomy, character, and contributions of each member organization.

Inmates and offenders need supports while incarcerated and most importantly as they transition back to their communities. Not everyone comes back to a loving and supportive family. Many have burned bridges due to the poor choices they made that landed them in the criminal justice system in the first place. Coming out of jail after any length of time is scary. I know this not just from the work I have done with inmates and offenders, I know this because I'm a formerly incarcerated woman. Because I did not finish my work crew for bad check charges, I had to serve my remaining 38 days in jail. Due to lack of an acceptable residence, I was incarcerated for 6 months when the women were housed in Swanton in 2009.

While in jail, I had the opportunity to experience a system that is flawed. More time and attention needs to be spent on preparing

offenders to reenter communities empowered with new skills and a new state of mind. Caseworkers do not have the time to work with inmates on reentry planning. Peer support can provide that additional service. The opportunity to talk with individuals who have made successful transitions is invaluable. I did some offender reentry work when I got out and once I disclosed that I was a convicted felon, I had a kind of credibility and kinship that the most dedicated human service provider doesn't have.

The thing that stopped me from losing hope while I tried to rebuild my life was the support I received not only from Voc Rehab, my local community justice center, the Department of Labor disability navigators, but from women that I had met in jail who were out as well. We became an informal support group. I got a call one day from a pretty tough cookie who was in tears, panicked because there was too much food at the grocery store to choose from after she'd been locked up for 18 months. I told her to go sit outside, catch her breath, and I'd be there as soon as the bus could get me there. When I arrived she told me that if I hadn't talked to her, she would have totally freaked out and done something stupid. I wasn't a caseworker or anything, just someone who knew what she was feeling because I had felt it, too.

That's why peer support is important. Even if you haven't been incarcerated if you have lived experience, you can provide support. Every human being has lost a loved one, had a relationship end that meant something to them, didn't get a job that they really wanted. That's lived experience. The Coalition, through its funding from the Department of Mental Health, offers several trainings for peer workers. One of them specifically deals with corrections.

One of our members, Vermont Psychiatric Survivors has a peer worker who works with individuals transitioning from jail and provides support around employment, housing, and recovery to prevent them from going back to jail. Additionally, he goes to the correctional facility and offers Wellness Recovery Action Planning (WRAP) behind the walls. WRAP is a way of planning your wellness with a specific toolkit that you design to deal with challenges in your life and WRAP training is offered annually in Vermont. We should have peer support workers attached to every facility in Vermont in order to help reduce recidivism.

I'm concerned about the cuts in the Community High School of Vermont in the facilities, but particularly in communities. Not every offender can go to adult learning centers because of their charges. Education helps reduce recidivism. It shows individuals that they can complete something and it's a step in a new direction.

Another key to successful reentry is employment. As a state, we need to increase the number of supported employment opportunities for inmates and offenders. There are individuals who are incarcerated who have never had "on the books" employment so the information for their resumes is virtually non-existent. They need help in creating a resume and cover letter, doing a job search, and discussing their criminal record. Two of our members, The Wellness Coop in Burlington and Another Way in Montpelier have employment specialists who work not only with people in the correctional system, but individuals with psychiatric disabilities, substance abuse issues, or are homeless.

This additional support can prepare them to successfully search for jobs or perhaps be placed in a supported internship or work experience. We collaborate with our partners at Voc Rehab and VABIR as well as the employment specialists at the Department

of Mental Health. Soft skills such as how to dress for an interview are just as important as what an individual has for work experience on their resume.

Inmates and offenders with psychiatric disabilities and substance abuse issues need more programming than is being offered. Although peer support workers are not clinicians, they are trained to assist individuals with thinking about challenges in a different way and utilizing a new set of life and coping skills.

I'd be happy to provide more information about our programs. My contact information is at the end of this testimony. Again, I appreciate your interest in hearing from us today.

Respectfully submitted,

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