

Rebecca Buck

From: O'Guin, Phaewryn D. <JDO09280@ccv.vsc.edu>
Sent: Thursday, February 02, 2017 3:17 AM
To: Theresa Utton; Rebecca Buck
Subject: MY COMMENTS TO THE GOVERNOR - Community-Based Public Hearings on Vermont Governor's FY18 Proposed State Budget

Dear Governor Scott, congratulations on your win. You may remember me from when I wrote you while you were the Lt. Governor. I'd been living in Bellows Falls, suffering from severe mental illness, homeless, and yet still very active in issues that mattered to me. I'd love to speak with you about where I am now, and where I am going. I feel like, after reading your budget address, I really relate to several of the issues at hand, and also, we have an interesting alignment of interests. You see, I am now in college at Community College of Vermont, one of your great state colleges. In fact, I am the student representative for my campus (Springfield) and I also am trying to solicit interest from other CCV students to start an IEEE student chapter. IEEE is the largest, international professional association for engineers in the world. For students, IEEE helps them develop their interest and professional identity in STEM fields and helps expand their network. There are also an abundance of IEEE scholarships (some are society specific) and technical conferences for student members.

So far I have a perfect 4.0 GPA in my studies at CCV. I'm active in the student body, I'm actively working to bring more STEM participation to Vermont State Colleges, and I got here because VERMONT SAVED ME.

I'd like to tell you how Vermont saved me. I moved to Vermont in 2003, because I was homeless and it seemed the best place in the country to be, when one has no ties to anything else. Some nice people in Albany were charitable towards me and let me stay in a camper on their property for a while until I found my first job in Vermont, at the Craftsbury General Store. From there I moved into a tent in another nice Vermonter's back yard until I save enough money to rent my first residence in the state. That was in Hardwick. I lived there for several years, and during that time, became aware through the great social services in the village, that I was in an abusive relationship. Using the skills and strength given to me by that great organization, AWARE, I was able to find the strength to go to court and get a restraining order, and escape that relationship. Unfortunately, at the time I had been secretly sleeping in the closet at my job instead of going home, and due to the time missed at that job, the fact that I was sleeping in the closet, and the fact that I was severely unable to perform my duties while being absolutely terrified for my life, I lost my job. Not long after, I could no longer pay my rent, and ended up homeless, again.

I ended up homeless because even with a full time job working in an office as an office manager, I couldn't pay the bills on one income. I have my social security lifetime records in front of me here, and during those years, I made the most money I have ever made in my life: \$21,467. On that income, I had opened a cat rescue, and saved about 20 animals, all out of my pocket, but it all fell apart when I had to escape an abusive relationship... and the secondary income he provided for the household. You see, it's just not possible on \$11 an hour to keep a roof over your head in Vermont. I don't know how I feel about increasing minimum wage, but I do know how it feels to lose your home because you can't afford one.

During the process of removing myself from that toxic relationship, where I was both physically and emotionally abused, I also suffered from a long-standing mental illness. I know this because I recall as a teenager how depressed I was, and how I used to self-harm. The stress of an abusive relationship, and then the absolutely terrifying process of escaping an abuser was more than I could handle, and I experienced a severe mental health crisis when I found out my life was falling apart, that I was going to lose my home, to be out there, ALONE, truly alone, with nothing. I'd never been alone before, and it was terrifying.

Fortunately, once again, another outstanding VERMONT FAMILY took me in, and through them, I was able to receive, for the first time, professional care for my mental illness. They paid for me to see their private psychiatrist. You see, there's a problem of a lack of psychiatrists in the state. In some parts of the state, there are

NO doctors at all providing psychiatric care, and in many more, there are those who do not accept Medicaid. Things being as they were, living with one of those "rugged conservatives" in the state, I went for a period of time with no health insurance. And because of that, I now have some pretty high medical bills I'm still paying on. But as all things go, things shift, and change, and after 2 years of living as part of this family, they asked me to move on.

I was, once again, homeless. At the time I had attempted several part time jobs, but my mental illness was so extreme that it was almost impossible for me to do the job duties and hold myself together. I did find one job I could handle, working in the meat department of a small locally owned grocery in Waitsfield, Vermont, Mehuron's Market. I worked about 20 hours a week, and I did manage to make enough money to pay the rent on a tiny basement apartment in Williamstown. However, what I'd not considered when I took the ONLY apartment I could afford, was the gas to make the commute. You see, there are no buses in rural Vermont. Many Vermonters have to drive upwards of 75 miles a day just getting to and from work. My trip was 30 miles each way. There were many weeks when I slept at a little park just outside Waitsfield in my car, because I didn't have enough gas to go home and get back to work the next day. My life was dismal. So when an opportunity came about for me to move in with a friend in a new area, I took it.

I moved to Bellows Falls Vermont in 2010. I didn't know a few things at the time, things I'd not thought to consider, like the fact that there weren't actually any JOBS in Bellows Falls, or that there were not any psychiatrists in Bellows Falls. At the time, I was on medication for my mental illness... medication that I absolutely required to be functional. I found a job... in Brattleboro - another job with a 25 mile commute - this is a serious problem in Vermont. But I didn't find any psychiatrist that was accepting patients. My primary care doctor outright REFUSED to prescribe psychiatric medications to me, and when I tried to look for other doctors who possibly would, I was labeling "a doctor shopper", a term I'd never heard of before, probably because I'm clueless about drug culture, but that is used to describe addicts who go from doctor to doctor to get multiple prescriptions to abuse. I assure you, that was NOT the case, but what became of it was that I was immediately dismissed at every doctor's office I went to, and no one would accept me as a patient, so I went without necessary psychiatric medication. My life fell apart. In desperation, I tried to get into an inpatient hospital program again and again - I was told that was the ONLY WAY to get psychiatric care, and again and again, I was turned away by HCRS (the local designated service agency) screeners who refused to admit me, or even allow me to see a doctor. I was referred, by my primary care doctor himself, via AMBULANCE to the Springfield ER, only to be told THREE TIMES to "go home" because "we can't do anything for you". What I eventually ended up doing was taking the 6AM hour long bus ride to Brattleboro every day, and sitting in the waiting room at the Brattleboro Retreat, until 1 day, someone was discharged, and a bed became available.

You'd think that would be a happy ending, but as it would turn out, I was misdiagnosed, and prescribed medications that made me worse. And that's when I became homeless. I also spent 9 days in the Windham Center, who also refused to prescribe the medications I'd been on before and functional on, and prescribed me more medications that made things worse. I spent 2 years homeless, camping in the forest outside Bellows Falls, with my 3 cats and a friend. There's an article about me in The Commons newspaper. I'll share that article with you, if you'd like, just email me and I can send you a copy.

During my period of homelessness in Bellows Falls, I was saved by Vermonters once again, this time in the form of a great community nonprofit call Our Place. Our Place is a drop-in center and food shelf, and they helped me to apply for Social Security disability, and they referred me to a new program called Pathways to Housing Vermont. Pathways to Housing Vermont accepted me as a client, got me in to see their private psychiatrist, who FINALLY diagnosed me correctly: PTSD and Anxiety (go figure, after being a battered woman, and growing up with a drug addict as a mother who made me sick for attention). I was put on THE RIGHT MEDICATIONS, and for the first time in my life MY HEAD CLEARED.

Today I write you as a Vermonter, as a survivor of domestic abuse, as someone with mental illness, and as a woman in engineering. I write you to tell you what it takes to make my life livable today. It's sort of a long list, so I'll keep it basic. Because I do not have the means to own a car, I depend on public transportation. But because I live in a rural area, I also depend on The Current (CRT)'s MEDICAID RIDES to doctor's appointments. Without them, I would have to get all my medical care locally, and I'll be honest, it's not great care. We're talking about the same hospital that turned me away 3 times while in mental health crisis. So I need my RIDES,

which are MEDICAID FUNDED to medical appointments. Without these, I would once again become disabled by my health. I depend on Medicaid and Medicare. I paid into the system all my life, and I absolutely need those funds now. I have no income beside my Social Security disability of \$896 a month. I can't afford to pay for health insurance. I already pay a copay on my prescriptions, it's very low, and I hope it stays that way. It's subsidized by Medicaid, and it is absolutely essential to me. Now you may be wondering, on \$896 a month, how I live, and I can tell you I LIVE COMFORTABLY in a 1 bedroom apartment BECAUSE of a subsidy. I depend on that subsidy to give me a housing voucher, my housing voucher comes from the Vermont Department of Mental Health. Without that, I am homeless again. With that subsidy, I can afford to have a roof over my head, and basic needs met, things like toilet paper, soap, razors, and q-tips - things I lived without while homeless. You don't realize how much you love q-tips until you haven't had any for 2 years. Please consider working on that backlog of applications for Section 8, the one that is so backed up that the waiting list is actually CLOSED. Everyone deserves housing they can afford. Additionally, I depend on EBT FOOD STAMPS. Today I have eaten 976 calories. I know because I keep count because my health matters to me. Calories I could not have gotten from healthy food sources without EBT benefits. And finally, with my basic needs met as they are, I am able to focus on MY LIFE, and so, these days I depend on FINANCIAL AID FOR COLLEGE. Without it, I would be just one more person on the system, doing nothing with my life, with no future, and no hope. But I'm not. I'm focused, determined, and absolutely dedicated to IMPROVE MYSELF, to GIVE BACK TO MY COMMUNITY, and all the Vermonter's who have helped me when I had nothing at all. I'm going to get my degree - but it all depends on YOU, and YOUR leadership. Without the support of the state of Vermont, I would not be on my way to a second career in technology. I would not be volunteering for STEM organizations, and working to bring more technology and engineering resources to students in the state. I wouldn't be on my way to giving back. I depend on these few things that the state of Vermont funds in order to succeed. Please don't cut these wonderful services that have enabled my recovery, and the recovery of others like me. Please work to build better mental health services in the state, to bring more psychiatrists into the state, to fund Medicaid services that support people in crisis.

I'm depending on you, Governor Scott. You got my vote. Do you have my back?

With Highest Regards,

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