

Testimony on H. 783

Hyam Siegel

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For the record, I am Hyam Siegel from Brattleboro, Vermont. I want to start by offering full disclosure. You have recently heard from my daughter Brenda Siegel. I would like to offer another perspective on the issue that you have before you. While, I fully support the plan to heal the overdose crisis that my daughter has put forth in our state, it is important to note that within our own family, throughout Kaya's life and since his death there is a diversity of viewpoints on issues pertaining to care and treatment. I have never before submitted testimony such as this, I do now, because I have watched this system designed to help people, in fact harm them for many years, and I am concerned that the bill before you represents a step in the wrong direction. I do not support H.783 in its current form.

On March 8th, 2018, my grandson, Kaya Siegel died of an overdose after a year in recovery. My son, Kaya's father, also died while using Heroin on October 13th of 1996. Neither had the support that they needed for their mental health and, in the case of my grandson, the system itself was nearly impossible to navigate. It often left him for days or weeks and sometimes months without the medication that he needed, without a bed for treatment or detox, and at times without providers at all.

I was charged in his lifetime with helping him to navigate these systems and supporting him while in treatment and transition. Sometimes with the help of four or five educated, resourceful family members trying to navigate, we could not find our way. In my efforts to help Kaya with his recovery I was primarily in charge of evaluating possible treatment and living situation options. Recovery homes were the weakest link. I have reviewed the offerings of about 15 different homes. While some are legitimate businesses providing a service for a reasonable amount of compensation, many are truly disreputable operations exploiting a vulnerable population that has limited options. As there are always a fresh supply of residents available (I never talked to a recovery home that wasn't at capacity all the time), recovery home operators have little motivation to put in the extra effort when a resident needs it. In fact evicting a resident almost always results in a financial benefit to the operator who retains various deposits and fees while generally replacing the tenant in a day or two. Proper regulation of such an industry is essential to weed out the bad actors, help the borderline operations and to reward the best facilities for their important good work.

I was not always a proponent of harm reduction strategies, however, for some time now, I have understood it to be what is needed to keep people alive and get them on track to recovery. Kaya was not able to maintain recovery without both his Lamictal for bi-polar and Suboxone for Opioid Use Disorder, nor was he always able to obtain a prescription for Suboxone, leaving him to buy it on the street or relapse. He was left without both on many occasions, often due to barriers outside of himself. Barriers that are built into the system of recovery in Vermont.

Sudden removals from treatment or recovery homes designed to support people in recovery is extremely destabilizing to people who suffer from this disease. This essentially happened to Kaya on one occasion when he was doing well. This caused one of his most severe reoccurrences. Any time that a person with Opioid Use Disorder is destabilized, they are put at extreme risk. If it were any other disease we would work to remedy, not codify into law, a practice that does just this. While I appreciate the spirit of this bill, it is dangerous as written, it will cause harm to people with the disease. Any person in recovery or family member who has come across multiple recovery homes, knows that not all are good players and to remove any protection for the tenants of these homes is a risk not worth taking. To put into law destabilization, to set up a system in which recovery home operators essentially self regulate and ultimately codify into law an existing practice of sudden removal from housing without any

true requirement to help the person stabilize will subject individuals and their families to many hardships and death. I do not offer that people will die for impact, it is simply the nature of the disease that destabilization is an extreme risk. It requires support to seek and remain in recovery, people when left alone to fend for themselves, often simply cannot succeed. There was not a single time that Kaya entered recovery in which he was able to do that alone. Each time multiple members of our family supported him in doing so. There are so many with this disease who do not have families such as ours and already have an even bigger uphill battle than ours did. A battle that, even with all the support, our family did not win.

Landlord tenant law is aimed after many years of research, to adequately protect the needs of landlords and tenants. This law, while well intentioned, protects recovery home operators, landlords and not people in recovery, tenants. To enter into an exception this broad in a safe and responsible way, an agreement between people in recovery, active use, advocates and recovery home operators should be reflected and it is not here. H.783 clearly discriminates against a class of people with a disability and does not offer them protection under the law. I urge you to vote no on this bill. While, I do not face this fight every day in the way that my daughter does, I do frequently worry about the suffering of other families and the loss of their loved ones in an ever failing system with limited support for folks with the disease. This bill will cause too much harm to be entered into responsibly. I would support a strong bill that gave this exception only if there was adequate and equal protection built into the law for the folks who are in recovery homes.

I ask you to imagine that these were your sons or daughters, your grandchildren, and decide if you think this bill protects them from harm. I have buried my first born son and first born grandson and it is my hope that other families never have to experience the same.