

Dear Anne,

In response to your request for testimony : “After hearing the peer workforce presentation recently, our committee leadership team thought that hearing a perspective from Alyssum (its experiences and data on hospital diversion, in contrast to the DA crisis beds, etc) would be the most helpful insight to gain from the front lines of peer initiatives.”

This following might help the House Health Care Committee understand why our data and occupancy is different from DA crisis beds. I know of no better way to express the differences in how we approach mental health care. So, if you could kindly offer this to anyone who is interested, I am thinking that guest and staff testimony could answer some of the questions posed.

I have probably included more here than needed, but I felt that the whole picture of Alyssum might be captured in this format which includes guest testimony, staff testimony, and some of the trauma data we collect which basically underpins our understanding and approach to wellness being about “what happened to you” rather than “what’s wrong with you”.

Thank you
Gloria

GUEST TESTIMONIES

Alyssum has been a great place for me to come as a step down from the hospital. I will feel so much more equipped to return to my home. I have had time to work on my goals with the staff, they have provided me with more tools to work with. I feel more confident and ready to face my family and home after this hospital stay. I cannot thank the staff enough for all they have done for me. They listened to me and they gave me great advice to help me understand more what my goals were all about

KS

Having just lost my support dog (died) I feel very fortunate to be offered a bed at Alyssum. The combo of having people share my thoughts and feelings through this trauma is helping me move on in life. Having Prince (Alyssum’s companion dog) around was an added bonus!He really helped keep my mind off Kyle and his passing

CR

I was able to get the rest I needed. I enjoyed my time with Prince. I enjoyed time with the staff, especially the suppers. The home is very peaceful (no drama was nice) Thank you for the plants!

MT

Alyssum is the best place I have ever stayed. Relaxed, good food, good environment and simple rules.

TT

“My stay at Alyssum was so enriching. It’s a great place to hit the pause on the chaos and focus on bettering yourself with great staff and marvelous peace. I learned about the necessity of truly taking a pause. In a fast paced world we do not get the chance to really reflect on the issues bothering us day to day. At ALyssum you can do deep reflective work with staff at your own pace, while your needs for a peaceful environment are met. Truly grateful Alyssum exists.”

“My experience here at Alyssum has been very healing during my loss of my Partner. I was able to express my grief in a safe and Loving atmosphere with support from staff. I am very grateful for my stay here”

“Alyssum changed my life. I honestly don't know if I would still be fighting for my life if I didn't have this safe space. "I first started coming here 4 years ago terrified, but the warm, welcoming atmosphere and friendly, compassionate, accepting staff have helped me transform my life. I am so grateful to have a place to return to and people to reach out to who always seem to understand and know just what I need.”

“My visit to Alyssum was Excellent Peer Support, I got lots of Rest. Alyssum is a Beautiful and Peaceful Place for Recovery ♡ It's a true gift to be able to have someone to talk to when things are tough. The environment was Conducive to my healing and it made a big difference for housing, food & companionship to have my needs tended to so I could focus on my recovery process during a stressful time. I'm grateful for what Alyssum is doing.”

“Love, Peace, understanding, validation, Hearing /listening, Kindness, and overall giving secureness is what this place gives You”

“I have done Lots of crafts that I would not be able to do at Home . It brings me to a Quiet Place in my head- I am not the best at it But try- so thank you.”

“The stay at Alyssum was full of caring and supportive staff interactions. I was able to express my thoughts, feelings, experiences with them and high feelings. Some of it is cool as well as helped me to refocus what I am putting my energy into. They made me feel loved.”

“In my experience, Alyssum is a very good program, and an exceptional example of the peer respite modality, so effective.”

“When I arrived at Alyssum I was carrying a lot of uncertainty & for around the environment while navigating vulnerable such a new personal space. Upon Meeting the

staff I felt safe, supported, and even laughing I felt trust and care and it was exquisitely marvelous.

Space for relaxation, rest, transformation, and excellent and profound conversations built confidence during my time here. I am deeply grateful for any part of sharing and the staff have shared resources in matters deeply personal all the way to system issues of oppression with care, curiosity and an abundance of love. I am looking forward to all the lifts I have received at - Alyssum unfolding in the coming days, weeks, and months, and will carry the laughter, joy, safety, and radical care."

"Thank you for helping so many"

"Upon my arrival at Alyssum I instantly knew I was in the right place. I felt a sense of relief and serenity overcome my entire being. Upon meeting everyone on staff, I was reassured that this was the best choice and decision I had made for myself. I was highly impressed by their compassion and empowerment. This "self directed" week long stay helped me immensely. Each and every staff member helped me re-open my toolbox and gave me some new tools to try. I feel more secure now in dealing with life on life's terms. Wish I could have stayed a little longer, however my journey continues. I thank each and everyone of you for your peer support. It means the world to me."
Lots of love Anne Marie Hanson.

I learned how to take steps to start how to love myself. My peer support starts here at Alyssum, never judged me and let me know that my best, whatever that may be, is good enough! I am not less than anyone else."
Kylee Jo Keith

"Alyssum literally saved me. I learned that acceptance is key to my recovery. I highly recommend Alyssum to anyone who is afraid to go to the hospital. My stay at Alyssum was life changing"

JSB

"Dear Gloria,

I am writing to thank you for including me in the 12 hours of training on Zoom over the last 2 weeks, as well as the earlier training 2+ years ago held at alyssum in person. Both of those trainings have resonated with me over time and have helped me in my journey in this chapter of my life as it evolves in my efforts to change my life not through drugs but through work and deep introspection (e.g., meditation and mindfulness). These trainings have given me tools and a pathway to make positive changes and the will to do the hard work.

Your leadership has inspired me, as well as your willingness to be vulnerable and honest in a safe space and inspiring others to also come together in this space that is Alyssum, but also now a movement that is bringing about change in mental health that is so much needed. Training providers across the state, and clients who are members of alyssum as well as your well trained and gifted staff and the framework you have

created for us all to change our lives. I chose to carefully reduce and then go off of my big Pharma psychiatric meds, and have over time succeeded in getting the support of my team—my psychiatrist, my therapist and my excellent primary care doctor who also teaches at the UVM medical school.

As you know I have been working with Alyssum since 2014 following an aneurism that caused a stroke, acquired brain injury and resulted in severe damage to my visual cortex and more than for form of severe aphasia that persists and have successfully re-learned to read and write, with work and have re-learned to draw and paint and used it as top -down recovery therapy following 1 month in ICU and 4 months inpatient rehabilitation and then another 3-4 months of outpatient therapy. You have seen my progress over time in this recovery I am sure. Important to note here is that the aphasia persists and while I have found work around a to live with it there is no “recovery” any more than there is for “mental illness”. We have to work at finding ways to change our lives and stages of deep self consciousness and hard work. Alyssum Gloria has been central in my life for this path.

The importance of spirituality, introspection, in diverse ways and self care and building “bridgeheads” with others, as well as recognizing that the goal of positive change in our lives is a process that takes time and dedicated work. These trainings have given me tools I can use and inspiration to work with and learn from on the path ahead of me.

I deeply respect you and appreciate the changes you have made in the mental health peer support movement that is helping to heal the mental health system over all — which is a process not an “Ah Ha” moment. I am inspired by the growth I see you have encouraged and nurtured in your gifted Alyssum staff and in clients who have become part of the Alyssum community. This is powerful and also inspiring to me and I am sure many others!

Thank you for your powerful and wise leadership.

*Warm regards,
Sarah Robinson*

Past Guest Book excerpt shared with permission:

“My name is Jodi Girouard and ten years ago I spent time at Alyssum. I began there healing at the farmhouse through writing and the natural environment.

I am about to publish my memoir called, **Living with the Neighbors**, the name I call the voices I hear from severe PTSD.

Alyssum is a big part of my book, a big part of my healing. I learned to release anger by throwing rocks in the river, walking the farmers fields, and talking with peer support workers.

I have a website, jodigirouard.com and jodigirouard.wordpress.com. I also have a Facebook page, Jodi Girouard Author, Poet, and speaker.

Recently I was in the news as a participant of the Deconstructing Stigma exhibit at the airport. Tomorrow I am featured as the opening speaker for an event for Mercy Connections in Burlington.”

“In Living With the Neighbors, Jodi Girouard offers readers an intimate glimpse into her personal world. Such courage is a rarity these days. It is admirable and memorable that she has chosen to speak for people struggling with mental health challenges. Her resilience, strength and vulnerability shine brightly, a model for all who strive to rise above personal challenges.” - Melissa Lang, Academic Program Coordinator, Mercy Connections

Here is an excerpt from the beginning of her new book:

“The trees in their green coats pressed in as I crouched low into my seat. I traveled between the Green Mountains of Vermont haunted by an unknown scene. A darkness was in my heart, sadness from trauma, despair from the neighbors that haunted me. I sat beside my sister as the car curled about the river on the winding roads. I watched as we made our way through the valley in Rochester, Vermont, amid the hills. The sun shone down on a normal day for most Vermonters. The light bit into the valley disrupting fragmented shadows, shadows too strong to ignore. Outside, the “neighbors” shouted their curses at me, sneered with derision. I swallowed hard and rolled up my window. The tires crunched the gravel as the car turned in towards the house. A greenhouse sat beside the farmhouse, plastic that framed seeds just inching out to the sun. I was going to spend time here. This was a peer support home, a place to heal from life’s hurts. My sister broke into my thoughts. My young son called to be let out of his seat, and then we were opening the doors to greet the scent of spring.

It was rural Vermont. Fields rolled to the steep mountains just beyond the river on one side. Across the road, trees grew to the edge of a mountain. Green everywhere. Flowers by the road, wild and beautiful in yellows and whites. I didn’t smile though. Didn’t throw my arms up and embrace the freshness of the day. I took it in, then hung my head with hair covering my eyes. “C’m on Jo, let’s go inside,” my sister, Tammy said. She got my little boy out of the car. He reached for my hand and I took his soft one in my wrinkled one. We walked to the farmhouse with a big white door. A woman opened it and smiled. She wore a flowing sundress that reached down to her sandals, with toes painted pink. “Hi, I’m Karen. You must be my new arrival.” She backed up to let us inside and then closed the door behind her. I waited until Karen guided us into the room. Her long hair hung loosely down her back. She walked through the kitchen, juggling her weight from side-to-side as she led us into the home. I looked at my surroundings. The farmhouse kitchen featured modern appliances. Beyond the kitchen was a big wooden dining table

and beyond that, French doors led to a deck. A sunlit living room was to the right of the dining table. It was open and looked comfortable. A Lhasa Apso wagged its tail. My little boy grinned and bent to rub her head. The dog licked his lips and I watched as my boy licked back with a chuckle. He patted the dog's head with delight. I tried to smile. "That's Ladybug," Karen said. "Let me show you your room." She walked through the rooms and down a hall which led to a bathroom and the only two bedrooms. Karen turned left into a room with a double bed. I walked behind her with my sister and son. I put down my bag and looked out the window. The Green Mountains were on either side of the house. Stillness there. From this room, I could see a line of peaks that stretched beyond the two windows of the room. The pines and tall oaks seemed to crowd in. It was a narrow valley, this town with mountains shooting straight up on either side, a colored wall now holding me in. I took a deep breath and exhaled. This was my resting place for a while, a place to breathe and relax, if I could. Karen spoke. "Here at Alyssum we are all peer support. The staff have all been through illnesses, been through similar emotions. We are here to help you rest, work through your hardships if you want. We have structured activities like yoga, meditation, and gardening. Or you choose how much you want to do. Many people work on arts or crafts that they like. Many walk to the town, or go to the river. You are in charge." "Mommy, I don't want you to stay without me." My Little boy pulled on my hand. "She won't stay too long," Tammy said. Tears wet his eyes. Tears wet all our eyes. Karen smiled down at him. "She's just here for a break. She'll be back home soon," Karen said. Then she led us back to the living room. Sun lit the room with what should have been refreshing warmth, but I didn't feel it. I felt blackness, an ache inside with much thinking to do. God, why did I have to do this to my family?"

Alyssum staff are very appreciative of Jodi, her courage and her willingness to share her book with us.

STAFF REFLECTIONS and TESTIMONY

"I have been profoundly changed by Alyssum. Being with people with whom I would not normally relate -- people with a broad range of life experiences, cognitive abilities, levels of education, worldviews, genders, and mental states -- both guests and staff, has torn a hole in my complex of stuffy opinions and preconceptions and allowed in a breath of the fresh air of new knowledge. Studying the core competencies and taking the IPS training in Montpelier opened my eyes to issues I had never thought about, and clarified questions I didn't even know I had. My focus has shifted from railing against the injustice of our culture and bemoaning the state of the planet toward ameliorating the suffering of the hurting human beings in front of me. This softening even allowed me to put aside my own pain and frustration so that my husband and I could work through a very thorny issue in our own relationship. Perhaps most profound was the impact of talking with many parents, which inspired me to contact my own father for the first time in ten years. This has been the most heartfelt, meaningful thing I have ever done, and I am honored to be a part of this wonderful team. Something I hear over and over from our guests is that we staff are all so different, and yet we work together so well. I have learned so

much from each of my coworkers, and I look forward to continuing to learn from them for years to come.

Alyssum truly is a special, healing place -- for both guests and staff.

Long may it live.” Catharine Moore

“I came to Alyssum with a lot of experience and knowledge about self-reflection, self-discovery and self-improvement. However, it was not until I started working here that I began to understand that self-acceptance was the true key to unlocking healing and happiness for myself. In the almost three years I've worked here, I have seen that the experience of self-acceptance is incredibly life-changing for our guests. Alyssum is able to accept them, just as they are and where they are, without judgment. The taste of this feeling allows our guests to recognize even more about themselves, and begin to make the changes that are necessary for their healing. I am thankful every day to experience self-acceptance and see self-acceptance grow in our guests.”

Toby Mueller-Medicott

“Choosing Love Changes Everything

I began my tenure as a peer support worker at Alyssum a year and a half ago. At that time, World Love Campaign had been in existence a little over a year. Julie, my co-founder and I started this campaign to help make love more visible in our world and to offer a tool (a loved pin) for people to use to be present to one another. Little did I know that my work at Alyssum would be all about love.



Upon reflection of the past year and a half, I believe that what most people need and want is to be seen, to be heard, and to connect. We may not know how to do it; we may not be able to do it in any given moment; and yet we yearn for that connection, connection to self and to others. I saw this consistently with both guests and staff at Alyssum. This is why peer support is so effective – as peers, we show up, we're present, and we meet people right where they are. We choose love in each moment and the person we're with feels it. This helps to create a safe place for healing.

Clearly, this isn't reserved for peer support. When I consciously choose love throughout my day, I experience richer interactions with the clerk at the grocery store as well as with my family. When I'm present to myself and others, love is naturally there.

This is why, as a peer support worker, focusing on my own personal growth and well-being has been crucial. I came into the work valuing love, and as I leave, I am love. We are all love. I'm able to feel that and see that so much more clearly. I've let go of the stories (well, much of the time), I've let go of energy and beliefs that aren't mine, and I'm not only choosing love, I'm being love.

As I end my year and a half as a peer support worker at Alyssum, I can confidently say I have transformed and in part, this is due to the very nature of the program; to the wisdom, experience and knowledge of Gloria and Cindy, the executive director and house manager; and to all the love and “unlikely friendships” of the staff!

With love and gratitude,” Nancy

TRAUMA DATA REPORT

Alyssum also collects data on what trauma people feel they are recovering from. The following is data from our 2019/20-18 reports

Supporting Statewide efforts to increase awareness of trauma as a part of the service we provide, Alyssum has been collecting data on trauma for several years now. While the data has remained fairly consistent there are some variances.

<u>GUEST TRAUMA DATA REPORT</u>							
		FY 19	4th QTR	3rd QTR	2nd QTR	1st QTR	FY 18
1	TRAUMA overall	95%	100%	93%	95%	94%	96%
2	SPIRITUAL EMERGENCE /PSYCHOSIS	54%	71%	39%	48%	57%	57%
3	PROVIDER SYSTEM	63%	71%	61%	60%	60%	55%
4	PHYSICAL & SEXUAL	90%	90%	85%	95%	87%	88%
5	UNSAFE RELATIONSHIP	56%	50%	61%	64%	50%	61%
6	LOSS & GRIEF	91%	90%	89%	95%	88%	89%

TRAUMA STATISTICS: Line 1 gives an overview of how many guests say that they have experienced trauma - unspecified (in general). In lines 2-6 the guests are asked to check different categories of trauma which have affected their wellbeing. Most guests check more than one type of trauma. The percentages reflect an overview of different categories of trauma which guests state they have experienced. Most guests will check several different categories of trauma. Staff have noted that the more categories which are checked correlates with higher levels of stress, needs and coping mechanisms.

- This year 95% of individuals reported that trauma had impacted their lives in a significant manner. This data remains consistent and Alyssum staff work with individuals in a trauma informed manner.
- Individuals working with spiritual, altered states or psychosis remains fairly consistent this year as compared to last year.
- The number of people reporting provider system trauma this year is up over last years average indicating that system change is still needed.
- Individuals reporting physical and sexual trauma is at 90% this year. Alyssum staff, are learning and growing as they support people to heal from significantly traumatizing experiences.
- Unsafe relationships trauma is at 50% this quarter, which is a significant drop from last quarter. However the annual average was 56% for individuals who were experiencing unsafe relationships. Staff work with individuals about safety in relationships, boundaries and asking for needs to try to reduce recurring trauma and support the creation of a safer environment. Balanced relationships and intimacy are a challenge for many individuals who were raised with recurring traumatic events. Alyssum staff are trained to understand the dynamics of interpersonal and domestic violence relationships.
- Individuals experiencing loss and grief continue to be significantly high at 91% this year. Grief and loss are a significant factor in recovery and trauma work. Alyssum staff support people to identify the emotions of grief and support “grief work” as part of the healing process. Individuals are learning that loss and grief can come from many sources. Grief work training is needed in Vermont.