

Hi Everyone,

My name is Melissa Story. I am a person in recovery, and the Chief Operating Officer at Recovery Vermont. Recovery Vermont is an organization founded in 1997, as a signature program of the Vermont Association for Mental Health and Addiction Recovery. For over 24 years, Recovery Vermont has served as a hub for all things recovery here in the state. The core of our mission is to celebrate recovery, and as part of that mission, I'm here to strongly support the passage of H.644.

I'm sure you are wondering why an organization that's dedicated to creating a path to recovery for people with substance use disorders, would support a bill decriminalizing the use of drugs. Well at Recovery Vermont we see the path to recovery as one which requires a holistic view of someone's life. And from that holistic view, we can truly meet people where they are, and understand how they have come to use substances.

The barriers and obstacles to recovery such as lack of housing and employment, lack of access to healthcare and transportation, lack of childcare—ALL those examples constitute much-needed connections in people's lives.

You see, recovery is about connection, and what is clear to us, and what is supported by science and public health, is that adding criminalization for drug possession and use, in most cases, does not support recovery because it makes these connections more and more difficult.

In fact, for many of the Vermonters that we intersect with in the recovery community, it is the criminalization that looms over them-- not as an adequate deterrent to use--but as a deterrent to addressing the underlying issues that have led them to use substances. Criminalization creates more barriers and takes away the vital connections needed to get help.

In fact, if we're taking a true harm reduction approach, which to me is the most humane approach we can take for addressing drugs and drug use, we would never utilize criminalization for drug use or possession of drugs, as its the engagement with the criminal justice system that introduces additional harm and reduces the paths and chances to health and recovery.

I wanted to point out that Recovery Vermont really supports the way in which this bill has been drafted. In particular, we support the make-up of the Drug Use Standards Advisory Board. We think it's essential to have a diverse group of voices at the table, including the voices of impacted people, as part of the process of determining how the law will apply to them-- and this bill provides for that.

This provision is an innovative way to incorporate the ideas of those with lived experience, which will hopefully lead to the development of policies that have the greatest possible public health impact.

We also support the bill providing people with an option of either paying a \$50 fine or calling VT Helplink. Keeping this fine relatively low is important for the many that struggle economically, while allowing the fine to be waived completely if a person seeks assistance

through VT Helplink—this can provide an opportunity for people to access health and treatment services.

Substance use disorder is a health condition and should be treated as such. And relapse is part of this health condition. People struggling with substances should be offered the same amount of tolerance as, say, as diabetic who can't stop eating sugar. People with diabetes aren't shamed by their health care provider for not sticking to a perfect diet—instead, they are seen by their doctor, perhaps they're offered to see a nutritionist, or given medication needed to get their blood sugar back to normal. They are met with compassion and given another chance to get their health back on track. And that is exactly how we should be treating people who struggle with substances.

In my own recovery journey, it took several attempts before I finally was able to get into recovery and turn my life around. Every time someone told me that I was a bad person because I couldn't stop drinking, it set me back tenfold, and made it seem impossible to change. For years I really wanted to stop, and I felt that no one understood me or what I was going through.

Finally, someone did something different--they met me with love, compassion and understanding-- and this was all it took to create a sliver of hope and make me feel like I was worthy of another chance at Life. This one encounter made all the difference.

I got my health back, I went back to school, started my own business, volunteered in my kids' classroom, learned the meaning of gratitude and the importance of being in service to others—all of this was due to having someone take the time to listen to me, to see me, and to connect me with recovery supports. And this was a decade ago—before Vermont had the thriving recovery community and web of supports that it has today. We are really lucky now to have a State, and a Dept of Health that believes in Recovery. From the Hub and Spokes system, to placing recovery coaches in every hospital emergency department around the state—Vermont has a wealth of support to draw from when one is in need.

Overall, Recovery Vermont is excited to be supporting this forward-thinking legislation, and to have the conversation about continuing to move Vermont's policy toward one of humanity, compassion, and harm reduction. Thank you listening to me, and for your attention to this important issue.

I'd be happy to try to answer any questions you may have.