

## Testimony for S. 195

By:

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Washington County Mental Health Services (WCMHS), understands and values the importance of people with lived experience that work support individuals that struggle with symptoms related to mental health diagnoses, substance use and abuse, and cooccurring diagnoses. Additionally, people with lived experience speak in the community, schools, law enforcement trainings, medical practices and community partners has played an important role in reducing bias and stigma while helping to obtain quality medical care. As a result, WCMHS has employed peers for more than 30 years.

The WCMHS Community Support Program Peer Services Program (PSP) is a dynamic program in which people with lived experience, in the areas of mental health and addiction, share their experiences and provide support to their peers and the greater Central Vermont Community. In addition, WCMHS strives to hire people with lived experience who can chose to share their stories.

The Peer Services Program provides multiple services and supports to clients of WCMHS such as Maple House, a crisis bed run by the PSP. Entry to Maple House is made by self-referral, referral from the WCMHS Emergency Screeners or as a step down from Home Intervention, corrections, inpatient care or as a diversion from the Emergency Room.

PSP also provides support in our Shared Houses and our Tiny House Project, Fresh Start House (FSH) and the soon to be started Arid House (AH). These are independent living sites where residents have access to people with lived experience for support around activities of daily living (ADLs), emotional and mental health support.

Services are provided to members of the Community Support Program of Washington County Mental Health Services, as well as WCMHS community partners, such as Capstone Community Action, Team Two Trainings, Maple House Crisis Bed, Downstreet Housing and Development, Home Intervention Men's and Women's Shared Housing, Tiny House Project, as well as through

the Sunrise Wellness Center (day treatment program), our Support Team, Community Living Coaches, and the Assist program (a medication oversight program).

New programs are being developed in which people with lived experience will provide valuable support in the community. Examples include cofacilitating de-escalation techniques to community partners, transportation support as well as a variety of community supports. However, due to limited funding the programs are slow to be initiated.

Education is a focus of the Peer Education Program (PEP). Participants in the PEP have spoken to students in schools as well as during a Team Two Training where law enforcement officials, dispatchers, EMTs and Crisis workers are trained in ways to safely resolve issues while working with people who are experiencing a mental health crisis. Historically, the PSP has also provided trainings at the Vermont State Police Academy and other law enforcement training venues.

Peer Support Services are trauma informed and utilizes skills and tools gleaned from Intentional Peer Support and Mary Ellen Copeland's Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) in their work as well as skills learned from Non-Abusive Psychological and Physical Intervention (WELLE). Support is provided through recovery stories, assistance writing WRAPS, as well as providing an empathetic and understanding ear and a shoulder to lean upon.

Peer support is provided in the home, community, crisis beds, agency buildings and throughout the community.

WCMHS Community Support Program strives to increase the ability of clients to independently manage their mental health symptoms, ADLs and ability to access the community. Peers also help to destigmatize those who experience mental health and substance abuse. Increasing evidence indicates that peer programs provided much needed supports by providing hope, insight, and guidance.

Between fiscal year 2018 and fiscal year 2020, peers within the Community Support Program (CSP/CRT) provided more than 26,000 services. This number does not reflect the services provided by the peers working at Sunrise Wellness Center or Maple House.

Washington County Mental Health Services, support S. 195 the bill to establish mental health peer support specialist certification. Additionally, we feel it is imperative as a stakeholder that WCMHS are involved in the development of the certification program.