

**Senate Health and Welfare Testimony
February 18, 2021**

Good morning,

I am grateful to be with you today and to have the opportunity to share about the value of recovery centers and peer recovery support services, and to lend a voice to the hope of the recovery community that our elected leaders including the legislature will choose to make care for people with substance use disorders a priority this session. A year ago, I shared with members of this committee about the Recovery Coaches in the Emergency Department program, which to date has served more than 900 unique individuals, over 80% of whom have engaged in often life-changing recovery and treatment services following their release from the hospital. I used this program to illustrate how our services have saved the state healthcare system millions of dollars, while helping people progress from some of their most difficult struggles to a productive life in recovery. But I did not ask for anything of you in that testimony, and today I will.

Substance Use Disorders directly affect tens of thousands of Vermonters. Tens of thousands of families. But in the end, we are all affected. Substance use is linked - as both cause and effect - to virtually every other issue we care about, every aspiration we have as a state, and everything we are trying to do to improve the places we call home.

The pandemic has brought on immense struggles at all levels of our society, but it has been particularly harmful for people in or seeking recovery, and perhaps even moreso for those who are not yet ready to pursue recovery. Relapses and overdoses are up dramatically, alcohol sales have increased between 25 and 40% throughout Vermont, many people have lost jobs and homes and much else. Inpatient treatment centers and detox facilities and hospitals have had severely diminished capacity for nearly a year, thus rendering hyperlocal resources the only option for care for people in need. The general assistance hotels are overrun with people in need of shelter, approximately three-quarters of whom have a substance use disorder and/or mental health challenges. And it might shock many of you to know the degree to which recovery center personnel are serving on the front lines in all of these places and more, even when we were not deemed "essential services" by AHS until December. Because of that we missed out on all forms of economic assistance such as hazard pay for our employees, with the exception of \$5,000 toward PPE and cleaning supplies. But we will be an essential part of the long, long recovery to come not just for the people we serve but for our communities. And the nature of that recovery will directly correlate to whether our government chooses to invest in our capacity and our wellbeing as people and organizations.

As dire and complex as the challenges we face are – challenges such as the opioid epidemic and the Covid-19 pandemic - if you want to find hope, if you want to find truly cost-effective, innovative, evidence-based solutions that save and improve lives, you don't have to look very hard. In one way or another, Vermont's regional recovery centers touch nearly every corner of Vermont. In 2020, despite the pandemic, we collectively served nearly 124,000 visitors who utilized our services. We grew. We adapted. And we reached out farther and deeper into our communities to serve people in more ways than ever.

As the chair of the Vermont Association of Recovery Center Directors, I have gotten to see up close how the recovery centers and our recovery partners united to face the pandemic together, how they became the caretakers and life-savers for some of the state's most vulnerable people through initiatives like Harm reduction to go Packs and hotel recovery coaching and street outreach. Beyond the nature of our work as dedicated peer-professionals and the low barriers to access all we offer, perhaps the greatest asset of recovery centers is our ability to do anything we set our minds to within our funding. I have seen what we have been able to do with very little. And there is no telling what we could do with more.

Recovery centers are home to numerous programs and services that seek to help people at any stage in their lives and in their recovery journeys. With support groups and recovery coaching, the Recovery Coaches in the Emergency Department program and the Moms in Recovery Support program, with health and wellness programs and arts and music therapies, with services in prisons and on the streets, and above all through human connection, recovery centers stand at the nexus of prevention, treatment, recovery, and intervention.

Because of recovery centers, the innumerable ways in which recovery can be experienced and can be successful are not limited by how many days of care insurance companies will pay for or what types of treatments they are willing to pay for. We are not limited by waiting lists or pre-requisites. There are no eligibility requirements to walk through recovery center doors, and no one may be coerced into utilizing what we have to offer. We serve everyone and anyone, regardless of their background. Quite simply, we do what it takes to help save and improve lives, every day of the year and around the clock. Perhaps most remarkable of all: our programs and services are provided free of charge.

But the most important argument for the value and effectiveness of recovery centers isn't merely an economic one. I'm here to tell you that there are no relationships, no bridges to authentic connection, no catalysts for trust and understanding, no acts of acceptance and non-judgment so strong and enduring as what exists when a peer works with a peer, as when a person who has *lived* through addiction, mental illness, poverty, domestic or sexual violence, incarceration or some other aspect of the human condition connects with another and says, implicitly or explicitly, "I'm with you." "I understand." "I'm going to help you get through this." And "I will not give up on you." There are no forms of hope more powerful than the example of someone who has been there and lived to help show the way for another.

When I think of recovery centers, and other recovery organizations in Vermont, I think about the fact that the staff, recovery coaches, volunteers, group facilitators, sponsors, and other helpers who make what we do possible are the living, breathing embodiment of the promise of recovery and the potential that resides within every person. Every person who survives and thrives in their recovery and chooses to give back is all the proof we need that every life matters and that every life is worth saving. The loss of even one life is a loss for us all.

Every person who has achieved recovery is a bright light in the darkest of places. They are the proof that recovery is possible, that a life lived in recovery can be a beautiful, healthy, happy and fulfilling one. By choosing to work in this field or to help others in whatever way they can, every one of us helps to provide the understanding, the compassion, the healing, and a way forward and through the darkness that we all seek – no matter who we are or what we've endured. All of us are healing from something, and all of us need hope in our lives. That is what recovery centers are about.

Not only do recovery centers serve the most people of any node in the addiction-related continuum of care in the state of Vermont, but we do it with remarkable effectiveness and without significant resources in a way only peers can or would. It is because of our organizational DNA – peer-run, cost-free, and holistic – that we have become a beacon of hope, one that I hope will light the torches of others. Where there is life, there is hope. And where there is life and hope, there can be recovery.

I'll conclude by saying this: one-time is funding, like what was available via the Cares Act, is sometimes portrayed as a bad thing, as unsustainable. But what it is is seed money for growth, capacity, and innovation in a time of unprecedented need and demand. Our recovery services are in need of both the unprecedented investment possible through Covid-related funds, but also sustained funding from state and federal sources. We have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, here and now, to invest not just in recovery from the pandemic but in our recovery-oriented system of care.

Beyond federal Covid funds, one opportunity would be allocating the \$1.5 million settlement from the McKinsey opioid settlement and perhaps future opioid settlements to the recovery centers. If we were each to receive a portion of even this settlement, it would be a game-changer for our capacity to make a difference. The Attorney General and the recovery centers fervently back this use of these funds, which would not affect the state's budget and bottom line directly. If you would like to hear it, I could share how I think it would help transform our centers.

Through the legislature, we have from time to time received state dollars, including \$13,750 for each center in 2018 and \$20,000 in 2019. But these dollars are neither predictable or codified in statute. I hope someday that will change. Meanwhile, the State of Vermont, the Department of Health, spends 11 times as much in federal dollars on treatment as on recovery services, \$33 million to \$3 million, even though we serve many times the number of people as the treatment system at a fraction of the cost and in a more sustained and holistic way. Outside of any state dollars we receive

And finally, I hope that the legislature will prioritize legislation such as the recovery residence bill this session, as timely and bold action is greatly needed.

Thank you!

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