

Good Morning,

Thank you for having me here today. My name is Lila Bennett, I am the Executive Director of Journey to Recovery Community Center in Newport Vermont. I am a part of Recovery Partners of Vermont, an organization that represents 14 peer recovery organizations across the state. Together, we work within the Peer Support model to address substance use disorders and to meet our struggling and vulnerable people with what they need, when they need it.

“What they need, when they need it” is a simple statement, but it means so much. It represents being nimble on the front line, as the target of how to support the vast numbers of people struggling is ever expanding and constantly changing.

I have been the ED of JTRCC for almost five years now. It was April of 2020 when I stepped into the role. I had actually considered applying for the role three years prior to that, but the position was part-time, and as much as I wanted to do that, as a single mother with three kids, freshly divorced from an abusive alcoholic, it was just not in the cards. But here is why this detail is relevant and important: I do this work to help people suffer less. I am a living working example of how shared experience heals. I spent seventeen years in a marriage with someone who told me regularly that our misery was all my fault. No matter how hard I tried or what I tried, it never seemed to fix it, and I really believed him that I was the problem. I didn't know about codependency and how it relates to addiction yet. I had three little kids. I was a full time farmer. I became a farmer because I had been a teacher, but I couldn't leave my children home with their dad safely, and I couldn't afford childcare. He told me I was boring unless I drank with him. He would laugh at me when I would refuse- “how's your water?” he would ask. Or, “Look at you, so zen.” These are the tamest examples, and the ones I am comfortable sharing here. It got much worse over the years. It was confusing, and I didn't know this was abuse. I didn't know that addiction twists everything and everyone. I didn't know that addiction causes the person addicted to be a victim, to always blame, and ensnare their loved ones into the trappings of feeling responsible for their own, the person in addiction- wellbeing and happiness. I also learned that the way out is through accountability and resilience, and figuring out how to build those skills, rather than just through blind tender love and care.

For a long time, I thought that I should be strong enough to think my way through this. I should be able to be kind enough to fix this. I thought therapy and asking for help was for the weak. I didn't want divorce for my children. But one day, I saw that my oldest son was beginning to speak to me the way his father did. And I realized I was teaching my children to either be alcoholics, or marry one. And this was when I knew I needed help, and that day, December 26, 2015, was the day I decided to change my life.

I learned that I was responsible for MY actions. I sought professional help, but it was hard to find enough support groups and help for what I needed, when I needed it. It took years, after we split up, of being in poverty and scraping together each and every penny we had, to begin to see the results. Because recovery you see, from anything, takes time. I learned how to emotionally regulate. I learned about root causes and core beliefs. I learned about neuroplasticity and how to rewire the mind. When my husband left, I didn't even have a car to get my kids to school. I still lived under a cloak of shame and perceived failure. But today, I have three children who live their lives on the bedrock of reality. Of transparent communication and accountability. On self-reflection and awareness. That's recovery. That's what you are funding.

We took our pain, and we turned it to purpose. I have dedicated my life to breaking the generational cycles of codependency and addiction because this is the ticket to healing our hearts and families. For reuniting and strengthening our communities. For creating compassion and hope, rather than judgement and shame. I walked into Journey to Recovery in April 2020. I spend my life putting my actions into practice and leading by example and teaching others to do the same. I understand addiction from both sides, now. Instead of becoming resentful toward my children's father, I have chosen to deeply understand his pain, and teach those who want to learn the way out, the way out. I spend my life educating every person who walks in the door that there are root causes to how they got to where they are, and there is a roadmap forward. Every roadmap is different, and every one takes determination and commitment and courage. But each one is worth it.

Five years ago, our center had to close its doors and move locations and rebuild every staff member. We went from a one person show, me, to a current staff of eleven and serving thousands of people every year. We work in middle and high schools, we have a sober living and workforce development program. We have people celebrating years of sobriety. We have newcomers every week. We have mothers and fathers reuniting with their children. Peer Support Recovery Centers work because they are run by people who lost everything and faced the horrors of their own trauma and learned the skills to rebuild, and then rose, and continue to rise. Recovery is something that is in constant motion, for every person involved. See, this works because this is about skills. This isn't a quick fix. There is no pill or

magic wand. I believe our country has what I like to call a “resilience deficit.” Recovery is about building resilience. Recovery ripples to children, who learn to break the cycles that keep their families stuck too. Recovery saves more than just the person struggling with addiction. Recovery is what will rebuild and unify our nation.

We are asking for the continued funds for this, for you to write this 1.6 million dollar request for Recovery centers into the budget memo for appropriations. This 1.6 million dollars, and the \$500,000 from the opiate settlement for our oral health initiative, because this money will save us all money over time. It will allow us to expand programming in the community. It will help other recovery centers do the same work that JTRCC is doing in the schools. It will help us further our work with police and fire departments, EMT's, homeless shelters, and more while also keeping pace with insurance costs and cost of living increases. In the end, it will impact all nearly 200 employees across all our centers, all of whom, remember are in recovery, and continue to make this work their profession in respectful, dignified, educated and legitimate ways. This money directly rehabilitates Vermonters, reducing ED visits and repeated, expensive visits to treatment, all the while preparing them and readying them and getting them back into the workforce. This is about love, belonging, community and, through those things, creating healthy taxpayers that will support our systems rather than deplete them. I hope you will look at me, and now my children, and all my staff, and all the staff and participants at our recovery centers, as living breathing examples of why this works and why it is protecting our future as a whole. You will hear from a participant of JTRCC next, someone who is now back working in the trades thanks to Recovery. We are recovery, we are community, and our health ripples to the rest of the world. Thank you for listening.