

Karena Bayruns
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March 7, 2019

Oregon House of Representatives Health Committee
900 Court Street NE
Salem, OR 97301

Re: Testimony in support of HB 2831 to establish peer respites in Oregon

Dear Health Committee Members:

I strongly urge you to support and work to pass HB 2831 to establish three consumer-run peer respite pilot projects in Oregon. Oregon really needs peer respites.

First of all, I can tell you that I understand the enormous value of peer support. I started to make great progress in managing my own Depression and Anxiety illnesses when I worked at a peer-run mental health agency when I was living in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Encouragement, inspiration and accountability for self-care were far more compelling to me when modeled by my co-worker peers who had overcome mental health challenges even beyond what I had experienced. Peer support inspires personal responsibility and self-determination in a convincing way that doctors, therapists, and social workers usually cannot.

Secondly, my opinion about peer respites is informed by my experience in a usually wonderful 18-year relationship with a person who has a "severe mental illness" who has had numerous mental health crises. We have had some not so wonderful times in addition to wonderful times. When I first moved to Oregon, my partner was going through a very rough time, and his loud and delusional behavior towards neighbors led to us getting kicked out of 3 apartments in 2 years. On a number of his crisis nights, we would try going to the Emergency Room of a hospital. But he was often turned away from the hospitals for not having a plan to kill himself or commit a crime. So, during that very difficult time in our lives, the only way we could hold onto an apartment was because I was acquiring a lot of credit card debt paying for cheap hotel and motel rooms during crisis nights. During nights when it was clear that my partner was not going to be able to stay quiet after 10:00 PM when apartment quiet hours started, we would often go to a cheap hotel or motel to avoid transgressing standard quiet hour terms of an apartment lease. We noticed that he was able to calm down fast when we would go to some other location. These unplanned escapes to another location were the extra action he needed to realize that I was taking his distress seriously enough and he was safe. It helped every time. Unfortunately, paying for hotels and motels over and over again was not a financially sustainable practice so it was not the perfect solution.

My partner and I are currently doing well. But it took him about 10 years to start recovering from a flagrant psychotic break he had around 2004 and he acquired a criminal record along way when acting on paranoid beliefs, so times have not always been as good as they are now. If there had been a peer

respite for him to go to for voluntary residential help from peers who knew what it is like to hear voices and have weird, horrible paranoid delusions, he could have worked through his distress with support before feeling desperate enough to act on paranoid notions that led to a string of arrests for misdemeanors. If he could have gone to a peer respite back then, I also could have gotten respite for myself at home from his insomnia and delusional arguing which would have allowed me to catch up on sleep and get a break to recharge my own batteries to support him more effectively upon his return. For every one person who checks into a peer respite, there are also roommates, family members and neighbors in the apartment building who are also benefitting from that person being away to chill out and work through some stuff with fresh listeners for awhile. Everybody in a community benefits when there is voluntary respite for people in extreme distress, and not just involuntary interventions for people in extreme distress.

Peer respites are an affordable, proactive choice that will allow Oregonians with mental illnesses to have a voluntary way to take responsibility for their health during a downward spiral before housing is lost or being a danger to self or others leads to expensive hospitals or jail. If you have any questions about their value, please do not hesitate to ask me if I can help: 503-317-9071.

I commend Representative Hayden and Representative Nosse for their insightful leadership for this bill, and I also appreciate Representative Keny-Guyer's support as well. Thank you! I also thank all the committee members for this hearing and making time to understand this bill.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Karena Bayruns". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned to the right of the typed name.

Karena Bayruns