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February 26, 2022

Sen. Jim Abeler
3400 Rum River Drive
Anoka, MN 55303

Dear Senator Abeler,

I hope this letter finds you in a place of wellness.

I am the founder and Executive Director of Wellness in the Woods, a peer-run non-profit dedicated to improving access to mental health and substance use care for all residents of Minnesota with a focus on reaching underserved communities.

Peer-to-peer services are services rendered by professionals who have received training on how to utilize their own personal experiences in supporting individuals currently on the journey towards wellness. Peer-to-peer services have been proven to improve an individual's use of skills in practical environments thereby reducing their use of crisis mental health services including and not limited to accessing crisis response services and mental health hospitalization services. Overall, peer-to-peer services are a cost effective, evidence-based prevention method for saving systems money.

Currently in Minnesota, certification programs exist for individuals with lived experiences within the mental health, substance use, and criminal justice systems. Research shows that these services are proven effective in any number of formats, including individuals experiencing chronic illnesses, veterans of armed military service, and students at all grade levels.

Wellness in the Woods was founded on the principle of providing these vital services to as many Minnesotans as possible. We host a Virtual Peer Support Network which is staffed by trained Peer Support Specialists every day from 10am to 4pm. Through the Virtual Peer Support Network, individuals are able to join in an all-inclusive, non-judgemental, and safe environment to share life experiences and receive support for any difficulties they may be experiencing. Additionally, we run the Peer Support Connection MN Warmline which allows individuals to have one-on-one, over the phone conversations with a Peer Specialist. The Warmline is open every day from 5pm to 9am.

When these two services are put together, there are only 2 hours per day when individuals are not able to receive support services from Wellness in the Woods!

Wellness in the Woods employs 40+ Peer Specialists with hundreds of years of recovery experience put together. We are experts in accessing and navigating the mental health system. We also host valuable training sessions for peers and other professionals across the state including Wellness Recovery Action Plans, Mental Health First Aid, and various other webinars on topics ranging from the importance of language to recovery for diverse populations.

We see it as our mission to advocate for the mental wellness of all Minnesotans and, for this reason, we want to express our support for various pieces of legislation currently working their way through the legislative process:

- Creation of a Behavioral Health Department
- Giving one entity the certification powers for all peer professionals in the state with a Minnesota owned, peer created curriculum

We welcome your support and your future partnership with us as we work to build a better health system for all Minnesota residents.

I would invite you to engage in a one-on-one conversation with myself or one of my staff members to learn more about the services that we offer and the experiences we bring to the table.

I can be reached at (218) 296-2067 or jode@mnwitw.org or Monica Yeadon, our All Peer Network Coordinator, can be reached at (507) 218-7302 or monica@mnwitw.org. If you prefer to speak with somebody who represents your geographic area specifically, we have included a contact list for our Outreach Associates and the counties that they cover.

We look forward to developing a strong and productive relationship with you in the near future.

Sincerely,



Jode Freyholtz-London

Executive Director

Wellness in the Woods

jfl/my

Encl: Outreach Associate Contact Information

Wellness in the Woods material