



Team Effort

I've learned over the years that anything worth having takes hard work and a team of people to push things over the finish line. I learned that from watching my father conduct our high school jazz and concert bands. He always started with individual musicians helping them get a sense of a new piece of music; he then would bring the sections together, whether it was the trumpets, saxophones, clarinets etc. Finally, he would bring the whole band together. At first, 60 to 70 instruments playing together was, well let's say, a bit of a challenge, but by concert night it was magical. We were all in sync with each other, and my father's leadership wasn't as important. In fact, when the band was good, he would walk off stage in the middle of the piece to show the audience just how good we were.

That same team effort is exactly what happened this past year as the Recovery Partners of Vermont prepared for the upcoming legislative session. It all started in the late summer with asking for volunteers to join the legislative committee (**Gregory Tatro, David Riegel, Danielle Wallace, Dawn Tatro, Kim Mercer, Peter Mallary, Jennifer Loso, Will Eberle, Allie Mullin**). The response was wonderful. We had some very knowledgeable members and some that had never dealt with the legislature before. The first thing we did, as we had the previous year, was to send out a survey to members asking them to let us know what their most pressing needs were. The response was loud and clear: wages were pitifully low and there were no benefits for staff. Both situations were leading to burnout, which in turn was leading staff to leave employment with a recovery organization to go where the wages and benefits were better. At the same time, the need to be doing this work on the front lines of the opioid epidemic couldn't be greater.

Soon after we gathered that information it became clear that if we were to have a presence in the statehouse this year, it would have to be substantially different than past years. A company, Action Circles led by **Amy Shollenberger**, was highly recommended. Amy started to attend the legislative committee as we were preparing for our legislative breakfast in mid-January. A slideshow was prepared and all members were there but would anyone come? Through the door came **Representative Eric Maguire** with his fellow Institutions Committee members. In all, we had at least 18 legislators show up that day. In the audience was **Representative Dane Whitman**, Bennington. His support later was priceless. It was a wonderful give and take, questions answered, presentations offered by two amazing women, **Rachel Goulet** of Jenna's Promise and **Arial Beaulac** of Kingdom Recovery Center.

In preparation for the legislative breakfast, we did something that was a game changer. Amy explained that if you do not know what you want, there is no way a legislative body is going to do anything for you and asked us to determine what our "ask" of them would be. We immediately put together a short questionnaire and had every member respond to the question: What would make you whole in your recovery organization in terms of wages and benefits to do your job as best you could? We compiled the results and thus we had our "ask." \$1.85 million for Recovery Centers and another \$1 million for the Vermont Foundation for Recovery's 8 Recovery Houses across the state. This information was compiled in a one-pager for us to use at the legislative breakfast and all interactions with legislators from that point on.

Representative Dane Whitman introduced our "ask" in the House Health and Welfare Committee and testimony was sought to back it up. I was asked to testify along with **Gregory Tatro**, of Jenna's Promise, while at the same time everyone was writing, calling, and meeting with their legislators with the one-pager in hand. At the same time, the



House & Senate Appropriations Committees were asking for input on the budget, and we had several people testify (**Peter Mallary, Danielle Wallace, Bob Donnis, David Riegel, Dawn Tatro, Representative Eric Maguire, Jenn Loso**).

A similar but shorter process occurred in the Senate with **Senator Rich Westman**, Lamoille County, playing a similar role as Representative Dane Whitman. Again, all of our members were asked to contact and/or meet with the 30 state senators to help them understand the importance of our “ask.”

It must be said that the Vermont Legislature, both House and Senate, were extremely responsive to our “ask.” They listened, asked questions, respected the work being done by recovery centers and recovery houses. They are truly public servants and did their best to truly understand and offer their support. All that said, there was and is no guarantee that any new funds would result in our efforts. To be perfectly honest, if nothing did happen, the collective “we” did our very best to help educate and inform our legislative body, and for that we should all be proud and thankful of the effort. It was a job well done!

What I can tell you, as I write this, is that the House of Representatives passed our combined “ask” at the \$2.85 million level and the Senate Appropriations Committee passed their version of the budget with our \$1.85 million. The \$1 million for recovery housing staff did not make it. The full Senate will vote on the budget this week. Then there are conference committees to iron out differences between the House and Senate versions and then the final budget goes to the Governor for his approval.

As with my father’s concert night when the audience so appreciated the music from the band, every band member knew how hard they had worked and how good they felt when they all played together. I feel the same way!!! Full of gratitude for the effort. It has truly been a team endeavor. Bravo everyone!!!!