

Testimony of Ronald Anderson to the NYS Senate Opioids, Addiction & Overdose Prevention

Joint-Task Force Hearing

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My name is Ron, I'm 57 years old. I've been Albany for 17 years and I have 5 kids here. I was 15 when I started using drugs. My first arrest was in 1979, and I went upstate for the first time in 1981. After that I had two more prison bids, and 41 arrests, most of which were drug related. Being on opioids and knowing that I wouldn't be treated for that, going into jail I would go in under a mental health diagnosis so that I would get some kind of care to deal with withdrawal. When I got out of prison, I had no support and was still homeless so of course I picked up. Because my tolerance dropped, I would overdose and thankfully a friend was always there to save my life or take me to the hospital. My older children went 25 years without a father.

My drug use has always been due to depression, loss of hope, and homelessness. It has never been because I am a bad person. In my experience though, every time I tried to get help, I was either refused or offered help with issues that I didn't need help with. All of this just kept me using and using even more, which then made everything else worse. It was a vicious cycle: Hustle, cop, use... hustle, cop, use...that's it. I was never stably housed. Even after nearly dying, I would go right back to this cycle. As a black man without insurance, I watched time and again how my white friends were able to get treatment and other services while I was left to suffer and struggle. I heard about harm reduction resources like syringe exchange, but I didn't know where or how to access them. Nobody ever told me where they were. I lost even more hope. I wasn't given the proper help and instead was repeatedly sent back to prison. I was treated like a criminal instead of a person in need of help. They made me feel like I was useless. We can do better from now on.

I want to be clear that treating me or anyone else as a criminal has never worked, and it will never work. I can tell you what has worked. A combination of caring and effective treatment when I was finally able to access it, being housed, and getting involved as a leader at Katal are things that have helped me. Arrest, jail, shame, and prison never have. Had I gotten the services I really needed when I needed them, things would have been very different for me. Those services would have looked like unconditional support, without restrictions. They should have met me where I was at, not where they thought I should be. If I was given housing even while I was still using and had supports there to help me with the barriers I faced, I wouldn't have remained homeless. If treatment didn't kick me out for using and report me to parole, and if parole didn't lock me up when that happened, I could have gotten better at my own pace, with my family and my community.

The thing I want you to hear today is this: The way to handle people trying to escape their pain and suffering is not to make them suffer even more. What I want you to do moving forward is to meet

people where they're at, not where you think they should be. Start investing in health, harm reduction, housing, mental health care, and other opportunities for people. Stop arresting and locking people up for using drugs. Reform the parole system by passing Less Is More NY. Give people the treatment and medications we know work, wherever they are- including jails and prisons. Finally, people like me will tell you what we need; you just need to listen to us. Thank you for your time.

Ronald Anderson