

Mr. Dennis H. Parnell, President/CEO, The Healing Place of Wake County

TESTIMONY

Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs

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Mr. Dennis H. Parnell
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“The Healing Place Model – Ending Veteran Homelessness through a Community Based Public/Private Partnership”

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you this morning about the treatment needs of homeless veterans suffering from the ravages of alcohol and other drug disorders (AOD) and specifically about the provision of successful, community based, cost effective recovery services across the United States.

Background Statistics on the Nature & Severity of the Problem

National Coalition for Homeless Veterans

- a. The VA estimates that 107,000 veterans are homeless on any given night. Approximately twice that many experience homelessness over the course of a year. Only eight percent of the general population can claim veteran status, but nearly one-fifth of the homeless population are veterans.
- b. In addition to the complex set of factors influencing all homelessness – extreme shortage of affordable housing, livable income and access to health care – a large number of displaced and at-risk veterans live with lingering effects of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and alcohol and other drug disorders (AOD), which are compounded by a lack of family and social support networks.
- c. Veterans need a coordinated effort that provides secure housing, nutritional meals, basic physical health care, treatment and continuing care for alcohol and other drug disorders, mental health counseling, personal development and empowerment. Additionally, veterans need job assessment, training and placement assistance. NCHV strongly believes that all programs to assist homeless veterans must focus on helping them obtain and sustain employment.

Providing a Proven Solution

The Healing Place model has a 20 + year history of providing innovative rehabilitative services to homeless individuals with severe alcohol and other drug disorders including veterans of many distant and recent conflicts. The truly remarkable aspect of this model is the extraordinary program success – over 68% recovery rate a year after completing the program. The fully loaded costs for everyone in the program are less than \$30/day.

Early History

It all began in Jefferson County, Kentucky in 1989 when the Jefferson County Medical Society took over the operation of a shelter in Louisville and hired a Vietnam Veteran with a Masters Degree in Social Work as the fledgling program's first Executive Director. Together they began to craft a unique social model that targeted the specific population of homeless individuals with severe alcohol and other drug disorders. By utilizing and combining the knowledge base, resources and talents of the medical, social work and alcohol and other drug treatment fields they were able to establish a truly unique and holistic approach to a difficult and solution resistant social problem. In 1998 the success of the program was recognized on a national level and was honored by the public/private partnership between the Health Resource and Services Administration and the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services as a "Model That Works." This opened the door for a concerted effort to begin to replicate the success of the original model.

Replication of the Model

Around this same time in Raleigh, NC an effort was undertaken by individuals from the public and private sectors to find answers to similar problems in Wake County, North Carolina. When the efforts and success of the Louisville Healing Place Model was discovered, stakeholders and organizers of this community launched a successful campaign to bring an exact replication to North Carolina. The original lure of the model was the fact that Louisville was able to demonstrate a 66% success rate (66% of program graduates were sober a year after completion) and that the facility was able to be operated at a fully loaded cost of \$25 per person per day. In 2001 a 165 bed facility for men was opened in Wake County. A 100 bed women's facility followed in 2006. The impressive success and outcomes of the original model was carefully tracked and equally matched by "The Healing Place of Wake County" (THPWC). Current statistics show that more than 68% of clients who complete the program are sober one year later (three times the national average). The combined fully loaded cost of operating both the Men's and Women's facilities is less than \$30 per person per day. This is compared to a rate of over \$70 a day just to be housed in the Wake County jail. In addition to sobriety outcomes, the overall success of the program is also measured by its contribution to the reduction of homelessness in Wake County. While these numbers continue to grow in surrounding areas and indeed for the most part around the country, in Wake County the numbers tell a compelling story of success:

A Reason for Success – The Social Model Program

The Healing Place uses what is known as a "social model" recovery program that originated in California in the 1940s. These programs are regaining popularity due to unusually high success rates and extraordinarily low operating costs. The Healing Place model is an advanced and modern example of this type of programming.

This peer led program places a high value on an individual's own experience and places responsibility for recovery on the infusion of hope through shared experience, mutual respect, responsibility for the welfare of each other and program advancement directly tied to individual effort. Advancement through the multi-tiered program is carefully designed in progressive stages which match the natural intrinsic rewards of success with an individual's increasing efforts to help themselves and each other. People who were previously estranged from society and each other find themselves forming a community of "sober survivors." Optimism replaces cynicism, empowerment replaces entitlement and hope replaces hopelessness.

A full continuum of services starts with a non-medical Detox unit that is open 24/7 and a "wet shelter" that accepts individuals that are intoxicated or high. This low threshold of engagement is a key component of the overall success of the program and insures that services are provided "on demand" - no waiting list! These entry points provide an opportunity to mix people who have not yet made a decision to stop drinking or using with a larger number of people who have begun the process of change or are even further along in their shared commitment to remain clean and sober. This powerful influence is the force that perpetuates hope and begins movement into and throughout the entire program and process. It takes about eight months to complete our program at which time the man or woman has a place to live, a job and is on the journey in recovery.

Complete Continuum & Coordination of Services

As an individual progresses and moves through the program a wide range of services are continually added, matching the individual's readiness, willingness and ability to effectively utilize these services.

A vast array of local community partnerships fill in any perceived gaps in services and round out the complete continuum. An example of these types of partnerships include; local VA services, Vocational Rehabilitation, Hospitals, County & City Agencies, Housing Partners, Community and State Colleges, Employers, Drug Courts & Legal Services, Arts & Entertainment Organizations, Sports Complexes, Civic Groups and many others. In essence, it comprises the power and resources of the entire local community.

The Possibilities for the Future

We believe that homelessness among veterans and other citizens can be conquered both effectively and efficiently through best practice methods, community organization and maximizing readily available resources. Our immediate objective is to assist communities across North Carolina, and Virginia to develop and build a statewide network of this model. We have already assisted in the development of a working replication in Richmond, Virginia and we are working on start-ups in Fayetteville, NC, Norfolk VA and Lynchburg, VA. We will continue to evaluate and improve them, and then in partnership with The Healing Place in Louisville, Kentucky help other communities and states replicate this continuing success. We will continue

to work with stakeholders such as the VA and other providers, especially those in underserved communities, to improve and expand AOD services to veterans and their families.

I invite you to visit The Healing Place of Wake County. You will be amazed before you are half way through the visit!

Homeless Veterans and The Healing Place of Wake County

Article from The Phoenix Newsletter of The Healing Place of Wake County (first published Summer 2008)

Kenny's Story: You Don't Have to Fight Alone

In a recent survey of the homeless, 28% of those asked about their military status stated that they were veterans. At The Healing Place, we are reminded daily that these numbers represent people in dire circumstances. Kenny, a veteran and current client who recently discussed his journey, puts these numbers in perspective.

“As an Army Staff Sergeant and a trained physical technician, I worked with veterans with a wide range of physical ailments. For example, I worked with Vietnam era veterans dealing with the effects of Agent Orange. I also worked with an older population of veterans who served in World War II. However, alcohol turned me from a person helping others into a person who desperately needed help,” stated Kenny, who served four years of active duty. He has spent the last 10 months at the Men's Facility.

Kenny, a Raleigh native, has called several places home. He attended high school in Maryland; received a college degree in 1978 and met his future wife in Petersburg, VA; taught school near Alexandria, VA; and served in the Army at Fort Lee, VA. He also worked as a physical therapist and other jobs in cities that included Durham and Raleigh.

In addition, some of Kenny's actions to obtain cocaine and alcohol resulted in brushes with the law. “I had stayed out of trouble for quite a while; but one night in Durham in the fall of 1996, the guys planned a robbery to pay for drugs—and I didn't back out.” An armed robbery conviction required Kenny to serve eight months in prison.

“Early in life, I achieved a number of my goals, including getting my college degree in teaching and coaching at the high school level. Unfortunately, in the mid-90s I began to self-destruct,” said Kenny.

While in Charlotte, Kenny bottomed out. He describes his stay there as a time when he was looking for a “geographic cure.” Changing where he lived, however, did not change his behavior with drugs and alcohol.

Kenny now acknowledges that every time he moved he lowered his personal standards and expectations. In several cities, Kenny learned the streets, learned how and who to scam, and began spending over \$400 a week on substances. One night, in the midst of this destruction, he realized how far he had fallen.

Kenny was with a group of men under a bridge. One of the men began bragging that he'd been on the street for seven years. Kenny looked around and realized he was on a destructive path that led nowhere. He needed to get help and get his life back on track. As Kenny states, "I had the wind knocked out of me—I had to regroup and face whatever was ahead. I wanted to try to change my life, and I hoped that God would help."

For the first time in years, Kenny was honest with his family. With the encouragement of his older sister, Kenny sought help for his addiction. A professional at another rehabilitation facility suggested The Healing Place, and Kenny came to the Men's Facility in late 2007. As Kenny states, "When I was looking for help, I knew nothing about The Healing Place—God brought me to this program."

As part of The Healing Place, Kenny realized that everyone chooses his or her own tools for living. Prior to The Healing Place, Kenny said he was selecting the "tools of destruction." However, the Recovery Dynamics® program showed him other tools for living—tools built upon the 12-Steps and 12-Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous.

When asked about his thoughts on The Healing Place, Kenny grins. Without hesitation he stated, "This place simply saved my life." While he knows that the program is hard, he also knows that those clients further along in the program "work with you and you realize that if you want what they have, you must do what they do."

"One of the main things I have learned here is that you don't have to do everything yourself. Early in life, I was taught to fight through problems and never to surrender. At The Healing Place, I was taught that you can get help and still be a man," maintains Kenny.

"The Healing Place has taught me a great lesson—you don't have to fight alone."
Andrew's Story: In His Own Words

I am a peer mentor at The Healing Place. I grew up in a Catholic home with loving and caring parents and I went to church every Saturday evening. I went to a technical High School and lettered on the Varsity Soccer Team. After High School graduation I joined the US Navy and served 4 years on board the USS Antietam CG54 stationed out of San Diego, California where I was an engineer testing fuels and refueling ships and helo's (helicopters). I completed 3 tours to the Persian Gulf from 2001 to 2005.

While in the Navy, alcohol was a way of life. We worked hard and played even harder. I spent many nights having fun drinking at first, but my drinking got carried away and things got bad.

I discharged out of the Navy in 2005 and was now a full fledged alcoholic. Things got so bad that I couldn't even hold a job and became homeless. After hearing about The Healing Place and having no more options, I decided to take advantage of a place that didn't want a dime in return except for my willingness to work on my recovery.

By this time I was scared and willing to do anything to get my life back. The program works because we work for it. So in return I get to give back what was so freely given to me; my life, and today I am saving money and moving towards becoming a productive member of society.

(Both men have completed the recovery program and transitioned back into society with permanent housing and full time employment.)