

Tara Gilbert

District 21-02

Senate Bill NO. 2166

My name is Tara Gilbert, and I was released from prison on July 3rd, 2017. I did not have anyone helping me navigate how to be successful after prison. I did not have anyone helping me navigate the court system to try and regain custody of my 6 children; which involved dealing with Indian Child Welfare. I did not have anyone helping me prove that I would continue to make positive choices in my life and that I was worthy of parenting my children. I did not have anyone educating me on past trauma, and how it affects mental health. I was riddled with guilt and shame because as mother to those six children, I was the one person that was supposed to protect them, keep them safe, and I failed at that. I felt I was the person who had hurt them the most. I had no support system, no hope, and most important of all, I had no faith. Looking back on that time, I was lost and completely alone.

I became a Peer Support Specialist at Lighthouse Church in 2019. At the time, I wanted to help other women coming out of prison and treatment find hope and faith. I wanted women to know that they do not have to be defined by their past. I wanted to help them find out who they are as women, find out who they are as moms, and find out how to be a productive member of the community. Becoming a Peer Support Specialist started me on a journey of self-discovery that I was not prepared for. Being open, honest and vulnerable about my past with the women that I work with, offers them hope.

People in the programs we work with are offered a trained peer who truly knows where they are at. At the same time, peer supports specialists themselves have the opportunity for continued healing of their own. Peer Supports often share pieces of ourselves that we have not shared with even those closest to us. It is in those intimate moments that the hurt and pain of our past benefits an individual who is struggling in the present. Those are the moments that have kept me in peer support for the past four years. When a participant finds their worth and changes begin, that is the time where we can see community impact.

A year ago, to satisfy the 1915i State Amendment provider requirements, I was tasked with leading the Lighthouse Peer Supports. Having worked with the state programs for over four years, I have seen the needs of the individuals we work with change. In addition to substance use disorders, we are working with individuals with significant mental health issues, needing a higher level of care. Sometimes the mental health issues affecting the individuals we support go beyond our lived experiences. We see a need to increase the diversity of our Peer Support team. Organizationally we see a high level of need for training and quality administrative support for our Peer Support Specialists.

As the only organization billing for 1915i peer support services at this time, we are still learning. We are requesting funding to diversify our staff and to provide educational opportunities to satisfy provider requirements. We are committed to providing the highest level of care to participants in any and all of the programs we work with. I have personally seen the life-changing impact of effective work performed by Peer Support Specialists with individuals, who when left on their own may have slipped through the cracks in the system. This funding, if approved for Lighthouse Church, is truly for the participants we serve.

We understand the value of peer support specialists who have lived experiences with a variety of life issues including traumatic brain injury, food issues, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideations, as well as substance use disorder. Due to the recovery community that the Lighthouse provides, we have often been fortunate enough to hire Peer Support Specialists from our own recovery community. Lighthouse is a community of individuals walking alongside each other on a journey. We watch each other fall and celebrate each other's victories, and we stand here today with our heads held high, anxiety riddling our bones, and testify to the changes these programs have made in our lives.

After prison, it took me two years of navigating life on my own to make it to the Lighthouse Church Recovery Community. I am a Native American woman, and church was not something we did in our home growing up. I stand before you today filled to the brim in my Christian faith to say that had it not been for the opportunities afforded me by

Lighthouse Church and being a Peer Support Specialist, I would not be here today to testify that change is possible, and neither would my friend, Luiza who I have had the privilege of working with.