

My name is Anastasia Whitley, and I am an Alumni of Oxford House Coral in Virginia Beach, Virginia, a Registered and Certified Peer Recovery Specialist (R-CPRS), and a DBHDS Peer Recovery Specialist Trainer. I was administrative assistant to the division head of Peer Services at the Norfolk Community Services Board. I assisted in the writing of grants, including one for housing in that role.

I am also a registered voter, homeowner, college student, former criminal, current secretary of Thomas Nelson Community College's Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society, but most importantly, a person in recovery from the disease of addiction and mental health struggles.

God willing, I will have 5 years clean on May 9th of this year and I owe much of that to the experiences, education, community, autonomy, and unique structure provided by the people involved in Oxford Houses of Virginia.

HB1172 threatens the existence of Oxford Houses in Virginia and that is unacceptable to me. I have faith that our elected persons will make the right decision on behalf of the recovering substance users, future recovering substance users, and the families who love these people.

I had prayed I would make it to a facility before I took my own life and left my daughters without a mother. A thirty-day treatment facility would have been ideal, but the ARTS program only went into effect a month prior, on April 1st (good legislation).

Virginia Beach Psych was one of the first facilities in the state to accept Medicaid for Substance Use Treatment and it still took a month and some days for them to do so. My then boyfriend and now husband, Jacob, came with me and we both decided to try to get clean. I had gone there once before and I didn't know what would be different this time, until the Oxford residents came in.

The last time I asked my grandmother for money was from the phone on the detox floor of VB Psych in May of 2017. I had interviewed at a house and was accepted, but needed the money to move in.

My grandmother was dying from cancer and still loved me despite my many missteps from what seemed would be a well-directed, promising life. She had bailed me out before. I was convinced I wouldn't fail her this time and she would pass away with me by her side, seeing me clean and knowing I was going to be okay. She was my only positive role model and cheerleader that didn't get paid for it.

I was released from detox and went straight to Oxford House Coral. It was a beautiful home, filled with beautiful women who had varying backgrounds and disciplines. I grew from the interpersonal conflicts that come from living with a bunch of women! And I mean that. True friendships were formed in that house that still live on today.

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I rapidly build a foundation of people in recovery who I could rely on. The house was a family and a refuge from the tumultuous life of addiction I had fell into over the years.

We learned all the positions in the home. I learned how to budget, pay bills, read a bank statement, perform an audit, balance a check book, confer with a bank, talk with the landlord for repairs (did I mention we have relationships that matter with our community?), hold ourselves and each other accountable, get honest, use Roberts Rules of Order, and find our own voices in a democratic manner.

I had a wardrobe because of these women in Oxford House Coral. Sheets, a pillow, deodorant, etc. That means so much more when you came in with nothing and are given these

things by an actual group of women who just want you to make it like they are. This is what our house spent money on when we had savings and our bills were paid. We made those decisions.

I moved in and immediately became secretary of Oxford House Coral. Soon after I became Chapter Secretary, Virginia State Association Secretary, and eventually Alumni Chairperson. These were all volunteer positions with no monetary compensation for work performed. I did these roles out of appreciation of Oxford House's effect on my life and those who love me. And others have taken those roles on since my leaving due to their experiences with and love of what the Oxford House model does for people like us. It is this appreciation and love that has me writing this letter today.

My house checked on me a lot when my grandma was getting closer to the end of her life. I was able to take shifts of her care and change her diapers and bathe her while living at Oxford. I was only 60 days clean when she passed away. It took a village to get me through that loss. It took every bit of the love I received from the Oxford House family to fill the vacancy her death put in my heart.

I was so enthralled with recovery and helping others, I became a Peer Recovery Specialist at the City of Norfolk Community Services Board (NCSB). I used the administrative skills I learned from my volunteer positions within Oxford House to attain a promotion as administrative assistant to the Division Head for the Peer Recovery Specialist Division at NCSB. I used those skills to draft grants for funding.

One grant I assisted with sought funding for individuals to DBHDS approved recovery residences for people who did not have a grandma like mine and would benefit from funds for their first few weeks.. It turned out, as I was writing that request, I discovered that there are only Oxford Houses in Region 2. There are no other homes credentialed in this region. This grant was used to fund at least 13 individuals and more money is being sought by NCSB for this purpose due to its success.

I know that if anything were to happen, Oxford House would always be there for me. I don't ever have to use again. I could decide tomorrow to go interview at a house for a bed just because I feel that I need that environment again. No relapse necessary. That is one unique aspect of Oxford House. I have a home, no matter where I go. I could go to Texas and call one of the houses to meet up with some recovering women and get a bite to eat or go to a meeting.

My husband and I successfully own and run our home because of lessons learned in Oxford House. We are productive members of society because of Oxford House. I got my oldest two kids back in my home and had a healthy baby who has become a sweet toddler because of the changes we learn to make in Oxford House.

My grandmother passed away, but I have a family forever and a home in Oxford House where the door will always be open to an alumni like me. I credit my recovery and success to the person I learned to be because of Oxford House.

Make the right decision and please vote NO on HB 1172.

Very Respectfully,

Anastasia Whitley