

Good morning,

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), a DBHDS Peer Recovery Specialist Trainer, a homeowner, a mother, a registered voter, a college student, a former criminal, the current secretary of Phi Sigma, 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.

I have arranged some bullet points of facts. I have also included my story in Oxford at the end of this letter:

Why this bill is harmful:

- Per DBHDS's website, these are the number of houses in each region.
 - Region 1 – There are 30 Oxford Houses and only ONE other credentialed recovery house.
 - Region 2 – There are 60 Oxford Houses and NO other credentialed recovery house.
 - Region 3 – 16 Oxford Houses, 2 Other RR
 - Region 4 – 11 Oxford Houses, 34 other RR
 - Region 5 – 36 Oxford Houses, ZERO other credentialed recovery houses. This region includes Hampton Roads. Virginia Beach is the most populated city in our state. Norfolk is also here. Portsmouth has a HUGE opiate problem.
- Why are we removing resources rather than adding them? These Oxford Houses are occupied by real people who are trying to do the next right thing and integrate into their community.
- Oxford House is Evidence-Based according to SAMSHA.
- Oxford House is affordable housing for people who are just getting on their feet.
- The following would remove all "Level I" recovery residences by NARR's standards, including those certified through VARR, that do not employ house managers:
 - “... requires the Board to adopt regulations requiring each certified recovery residence include one or more resident or nonresident staff persons who is employed by the provider for compensation and who is responsible for oversight or management of the recovery residence; and requires the Department to provide, for each certified recovery residence included on the list maintained on the Department's website the level of support provided by the certified recovery residence”
- The peer run element would be sullied or removed altogether. There would be a power dynamic just by the position being implemented. The successful element that has been lauded and applauded by SAMSHA, DBHDS, CSBs, Drug Courts, MH Courts, Jails, and prisons across the state and the country, known as Peer Recovery, would be removed from recovery houses in Virginia

- When one person is in charge, is it not easier to have moral ineptitude or opportunity for abuse?
- If we restrict the operation of credentialed Peer-led recovery residences, are we not damaging the idea that people can and do recover? There are lawyers, judges, soccer moms, and affluent people who also come and live in Oxford. We are not unintelligible people. We are capable of thriving and have demonstrated success within the Oxford House Model.
- Different levels of care exist with intention. There is enough room for more than one credentialing entity. As my grandmother used to say, there's more than one way to skin a cat (poor kitty). There is no one size fits all solution. The OH model has been in Virginia for 35 years and Oxford House has existed in the United States for 47 years.
- Legislation such as this and the push for regulation of recovery residences is based on issues surrounding for-profit recovery residence bad actors. This regulation has greatly improved the standard of for-profit recovery homes. However, OH is a non-profit entity and the money stays with the house.
- NARRs recognizes the success of OH and its model on its own website:
<https://narronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/The-Role-of-Recovery-Residences-in-Promoting-Long-term-Addiction-Recovery.pdf>

What makes Oxford House Unique?

- Several levels of checks and balances that are peer-led. This would constitute OH as a Level I recovery residence.
- It is a not-for-profit model – You see where your money goes after you pay your share, in fact, you vote on what bills to pay and when and assign that responsibility of paying those bills to a house member.
- You learn to stand up for what is right, and you have choices in the home and a vote from the day you walk in the door.
- Someone who has not relapsed can still move back into a house for support.
- You could stay for decades if you wanted to.

My Personal Story

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. I had gone there once before and I didn't know what would be different this time, until the Oxford residents came in.

Members of Oxford Houses brought a presentation in about what Oxford House was and what life was like at the houses, and I was sold. My then boyfriend, now husband, told me that it was a scam. He skipped that presentation and told me that those people were paid to tell me that. Neither he nor I knew just how wrong he was.

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 the house. Our house, I was told upon entering. I was included in that "our". 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.

I learned to love myself again and to be there for others. I learned accountability, autonomy, as well as responsibility for others. We all kept each other accountable. We were part of a chapter of Oxford Houses that kept each other accountable.

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. We 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 accountable, get honest, use Roberts Rules of Order, and find our own voices in a democratic manner.

I was able to change my grandmother, feed her, and bathe her because of these women. I had a wardrobe because of these women. Sheets, etc. That means so much more when you're not paying for those things or receiving them from a government entity, but 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 house secretary, then I became Chapter secretary, Virginia State Association secretary, and eventually Alumni Chairperson. These were all volunteer positions with no compensation for work performed. I did these roles out of appreciation of OH'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. I eventually used those skills earned to take on a role as the administrative assistant for the Peer Recovery Specialist Division at the Norfolk Community Services Board. I used those skills to draft grants for funding.

One grant I assisted with sought funding individuals to DBHDS approved recovery residences for people who did not have a grandma like mine. 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.

I didn't drive, often I walked, but I was also commonly offered rides by women in my house and other OH members from local houses. My house checked on me a lot when my grandma was getting worse. They held me when she passed away and let me weep in their arms. And I did and

still do the same for them when they are in need even though we have all since moved into our own homes.

My now husband even eventually moved into a house after being exploited by a man “in recovery” who didn’t pay him for work and only gave him meals and board for 12 hours labor a day. I only moved out because we found out that I was pregnant, and we felt it was time. My housemates had faith in me as well. We managed to focus on our recovery and work on ourselves separately thanks to OH.

My friend who lived in the Oxford House down the street from my Oxford House bought the house across from our home so that we could live close to each other again! We both bought our homes here in 2020. That is how deep these relationships go.

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. 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.

We own a home because of lessons learned in OH. We are productive members of society because of OH. We get our kids back because of the changes we learn to make in OH. 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.

Please vote NO on SB622 and HB277.

Very Respectfully,

Anastasia Whitley