

Good afternoon, Senator Pierce, Representative Gere, and members of the Joint Special Committee of Housing. My name is Thomas Ptacek. I'm a resident of Portland. I was once homeless, sleeping on a mat on the floor at Oxford Street Shelter. I'm also a Veteran, and for the past 12 years I have been working for Preble Street. I have worked for Preble Street's Veteran Housing Services, and today I am a caseworker at Huston Commons, one of Portland's three site-based Housing First programs.

I was lucky, being a veteran, I was able to secure a VASH voucher (section 8 for veterans) after being at the shelter for a whole year. I was also fortunate enough to not be dealing with addiction or severe mental health issues. For those who are, the options can be very limited or even non-existent. Programs that can't or won't work with you unless you're clean and sober or free from (mental health symptoms) are simply not accessible for so many of our most vulnerable members of society. Asking someone who is homeless, sleeping in a shelter or car or on the street, to take on the serious, multi-step process of dealing with severe mental health or addiction issues simply isn't going to work.

Believe me, I know. When you're homeless, you're thinking about being in a specific spot at a specific time so you can eat, or do your laundry, or get a mat for the night. You may want to address these issues that are making your life so difficult, but without a safe and quiet place to retreat to, you are simply at the mercy of your surroundings. Surroundings which don't seem to want you to get better.

During this hearing, you will hear about all the great services and supports that are provided by 24-hour staff at these site-based housing first programs. There are many, all existing to help the tenants gain control of their lives and move towards better health, both mental and physical. For me, the greatest benefit to Housing First is simply that it is. It exists. It is there for the tenants to use as an avenue to a safer life.

One of the best examples of this I can think of is a tenant who lived at Florence House, another site-based housing first program. She was a fun, well liked person and suffered from a pretty serious alcohol addiction. This tenant was often seen in the common spaces, coming and going, and always very intoxicated. After a few months of intensive staff support, often during late night hours, staff began to notice that she wasn't always intoxicated when they saw her. One day she was asked about the evident decrease in her alcohol consumption. Her response: "I have a nice apartment now; I have better things to spend my money on." The difference was having something to invest in, and the availability of staff support any time she needed it. It's easy to feel lost and hopeless when you're homeless.

I don't use the word hopeless lightly. After working in inpatient psychiatry in the Navy, I will admit I didn't fully accept the idea of hopelessness. Sure, stuff can happen, and it makes you sad or question yourself. But to be completely without hope? Just didn't seem real. Six months into my year of homelessness, I understood. Hopelessness is real, it is debilitating, and it is scary.

I was able to access what I needed to get my life back together. Luckily, I just needed to get back into housing, I could take it from there. It still took a while to get back, I still struggle. For those who need more than I did, site-based Housing First is the only possibility, the only option that will be with them throughout their journey.

Please vote "Ought to pass" on LD2. Thank you.