

Good afternoon Chair Salinas and members of the committee, my name is Brent Norman Jr. I live in Portland, Oregon, and my age is 63. I would like to thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify regarding the importance of housing to both mental health stability and substance abuse recovery.

I was released from prison on November 12th, 2009. My parole officer found temporary housing for me in a halfway house similar to an Oxford House; I stayed there for two years. Fortunately, they accepted me without any money and no job – just an oral agreement to pay them the back-rent once I found a job. One of the requirements of this house was to go to at least 3 12-Step meetings per week, so I stayed sober; unfortunately, I still had an untreated mental health disorder.

I was soon approved for the Oregon Health Plan, and shortly thereafter began my search for mental health treatment. I was eventually diagnosed with bipolar disorder, for which I have been treated ever since. My mental health is now stable, for which stable housing has played a huge role.

I say this because I am sure that, had I not received some form of stable housing upon my release from prison, I would have wound up on the streets, just another unhoused person. Had this been the case, I know that I would have reverted to my old ways and joined a crowd of people that drank and used drugs – this, despite already having 11 years of sobriety. Had I gone back to old behavior, I would not have applied for the Oregon Health plan, and would not have sought mental health treatment; I would have just continued to self-medicate or have committed suicide, which I have attempted multiple times.

Since first being diagnosed with having bipolar disorder, I have had stable housing – one residence I lived at with a roommate for 6 years. Unfortunately, his untreated mental health disorder made it an uncomfortable place to live, yet I could afford no other housing; however, I was stable. Fortunately, at just the right time, I was offered low-income housing in the perfect location for me: I'm disabled due to a stroke, so living less than one-half block from public transportation and within six blocks of two grocery stores is very important to me.

Today, when people ask how I am, I honestly reply that I'm great – well, at least almost all of the time I'm great. I can say this because I have what I consider to be a beautiful home (even though it's a small studio apartment in an old building), in which I'm very comfortable and happy; my mental health is stable, I have 22 years of sobriety, and I volunteer with NAMI Oregon and another organization that helps people with substance use disorders. I owe all of this to having had stable housing upon my release from prison.

Thank you, Chair Salinas, and members of this committee for your time and allowing me this opportunity to testify.