



**TURNING LIVES AROUND.**



**To:** Chair Liebling, and members of the House Health Finance and Policy Committee

**From:** Oakley Lemke, former client of 180 Degrees/St. Cloud Youth Shelter

**Date:** March 15, 2022

**Re:** HF3599 (Keeler)

Thank you for the opportunity to share my experience with this committee.

I grew up surrounded by a great deal of conflict and trauma. When I was 13 years old, I made some poor choices and got in trouble with law enforcement, and even lived for several months in juvenile centers. During this time, I was dealing with a great deal of depression and at times felt that I just couldn't go on and I was even suicidal.

Two years ago, I was placed at the 180 Degrees Youth Shelter in St. Cloud and my life really began to change. I was shy and quiet at first, and I really didn't trust anyone, but gradually I realized that I was safe and secure. The staff in St. Cloud listened to me and they accepted me just as I was. They didn't just teach me Independent Living Skills, they actually showed me how to write my resume, how to apply for work, and how to transition from one job to another by giving notice and not just quitting on the spot. I learned all of these skills from the staff at St Cloud and am now able to do all of these things on my own. As I finished high school, I got a job at Burger King and worked part-time. The staff at St Cloud encouraged me to think about college and even showed me how to apply for financial aid.

One day, I received a letter in the mail and found out that I had actually been accepted into St. Cloud State. They sent me a poster that said "I'm a Husky" which is the St. Cloud State mascot. So without saying anything I hung the poster on the door of my room at the shelter. Everyone was surprised and excited to see that I had been accepted into college. I was in disbelief at first. It's an amazing feeling to do things that you never thought you could do!

Last August I started college at St. Cloud State and got a job working at the bookstore on campus. I've also reconnected with my family and this fall I will transfer to Brainerd Central Lakes College. My dream is to become an EMT.

It's really no surprise to me that LGBTQIA youth have a 120% higher risk of becoming homeless. Many youth that I know have families that just can't accept the fact that their children are in the community. Many youth have been kicked out of home, or their families wouldn't accept them and the kids were so miserable that they ran away.

Obviously, the most important thing that homeless youth need is shelter; but just providing a roof and basic needs isn't enough. I know from my experience that feeling truly safe, respected, and being in an environment where people are trustworthy and support you for who you truly are, is life changing.

When I learned to accept myself for who I was, my depression and suicidal thoughts decreased significantly. I realized that I could decide for myself and become whatever I wanted. I could also begin to make my own dreams come true.

I encourage you to support the HF3599 so that other Minnesota youth like myself, can have the opportunity to feel safe, secure, and...have the opportunity to make their own dreams come true and figure out who they really are.

Thank you.

**180DEGREES.ORG**  
**651-968-8908**

236 Clifton Ave South  
Minneapolis, MN 55403

1301 7th St East  
St. Paul, MN 55106

**YOUTH SHELTER AND HOUSING  
COMMUNITY RE-ENTRY  
SUPPORTIVE SERVICES**