



The Honorable Mohamud Noor
Chair, Human Services Finance and Policy Committee
Minnesota House of Representatives
5th Floor, Centennial Office Building
St. Paul, MN 55155

The Honorable Joe Schomacker
GOP Lead, Human Services Finance and Policy Committee
Minnesota House of Representatives
5th Floor, Centennial Office Building
St. Paul, MN 55155

Written Testimony Regarding HF487

MARCH 13, 2025

Dear Chair Noor, GOP Lead Schomacker, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Anessa DeGroat and I have worked for Wellness in the Woods for almost two years. I have never felt as blessed as I do to work for and with the most amazing, compassionate, and encouraging team members.

I have had the great opportunity of providing support to those calling in on the warmline, doing outreach, and going out and doing peer pop up events on the White Earth Reservation.

The people I have connected with always leave feeling better than when they called in or before they showed up. This is a space where I am able to use my life experiences as a means to help others through dark times. I have had countless encounters where I was told that I saved their life, talked them off the edge, or just all around made them feel better about themselves or their situations.

This work is needed and we are making a difference here in Minnesota.

Thank you for your time and consideration for Wellness in the Woods.

Sincerely,

ANESSA DEGROAT
ANESSA@MNWITW.ORG

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Eagle Bend, MN 56446

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Dear Chair Noor, GOP Lead Schomacker, and Members of the Committee,

I am writing to express my strong support for Bill HF 487 and to highlight the vital role that Wellness in the Woods plays in addressing the mental health and recovery needs of Minnesotans. The services provided by Wellness in the Woods are a critical resource, offering support to individuals who might otherwise face significant barriers in accessing the care they need.

Wellness in the Woods serves a unique and important role in our state, not only providing over 54,000 interactions through talk and text in more than 100 languages, but also creating meaningful employment opportunities for those in recovery. This model not only fosters a sense of purpose but is also essential in ensuring that those who have lived through addiction, trauma, or mental health challenges can give back to the community while receiving the support they need.

One of the most powerful aspects of Wellness in the Woods is its commitment to removing barriers to care. We serve individuals regardless of their location—no matter how remote—language is not a barrier, and past recovery history is never a disqualifier. This inclusive approach ensures that no Minnesotan is left behind. No one is required to have a diagnosis to receive help, and everyone, regardless of their background, can access the support they need to improve their mental and emotional well-being.

In times when mental health concerns are at an all-time high, and access to services is more critical than ever, Wellness in the Woods provides proactive, non-judgmental, and compassionate support to individuals across the state. The unique, barrier-free services



offered by this organization represent a model that is not only effective but necessary for the health of our communities.

I urge you to support Bill HF 487 and ensure that Wellness in the Woods continues to have the resources it needs to reach even more individuals in need of support. Minnesota needs this service now more than ever, and I believe that continued support for Wellness in the Woods will have a lasting, positive impact on our state.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
CARRIE JOHNSON
DIRECTOR OF WARMLINE SERVICES
CARRIE@MNWITW.ORG

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Dear Chair Noor, GOP Lead Schomacker, and Members of the Committee,

I am a St. Paul resident writing to request your support for Wellness in the Woods, a program that quite literally saved my life. At my lowest struggling with misdiagnosed health issues, unbearable medication side effects, and overwhelming isolation, I was on the verge of losing everything, even my home. I didn't have friends or family that I could go to for support. Alone, in my darkest moment, I reached out to the Warm Line at Wellness in the Woods.

Four simple words, "*I totally get it*," changed everything. For the first time, I felt truly heard and understood. They gave me hope and practical advice to navigate resources and services when all other systems failed me.

Wellness in the Woods not only helps people like me—it also lightens the load on strained systems like Ramsey County, enabling them to serve the community in more efficient ways.

Today, I am rebuilding my life with the right diagnosis, proper medication, stable housing, and a renewed sense of purpose. This transformation would not have been possible without Wellness in the Woods—a vital resource that helps countless others find hope and practical solutions when they need it most.

Thank you for considering this important investment in the well-being of our community.

Sincerely,
CHARLENE ABRAMSON

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Dear Chair Noor, GOP Lead Schomacker, and Members of the Committee,

I am writing this letter in support of Wellness in the Woods. I am a Peer Recovery Specialist who has worked almost three years as a Warmline Operator.

It is an incredible peer to peer support service, in which a unique bond is formed between two individuals. Through my own lived experience with addiction, I feel I can empathize, support and offer hope to callers who are experiencing similar struggles. It is a sharing which has an understanding that every person is unique, and has knowledge, and information to share.

Wellness in the Woods has been an amazing organization to work for. Jode Freyholtz-London, the founder and our leader, has been so supportive and giving in this organization. Due to her hard work and dedication, Wellness in the Woods has been so successful throughout the state of Minnesota. I am more than proud to be a part of a program which is nonjudgmental, offers free services seven days a week, and has a caring and supportive staff, who are trained in peer support and ready to actively listen and empowers others to find solutions in their own struggles.

Thanks for taking the time to read this letter,

Sincerely,
CHERI BACKES
36556 335TH AVE
MELROSE, MN 56352
(320) 290-8280

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Written Testimony Regarding HF487

March 17, 2025

Dear Chair Noor, GOP Lead Schomacker, and Members of the Committee,

Hello! My name is Danielle, and I am a 41-year-old living in very rural northern MN, Kittson County to be exact.

This past November I had a suicide attempt which led me to a 3-day emergency hospitalization followed by a voluntary 30-day inpatient stay at an IRTS (Intensive Residential Treatment Services) facility. Upon coming home, I took enough time to research, and I established a WRAP (Wellness Recovery Action Plan) for my support system. These were all new tools to help me cope with my mental health recovery while I was at home. One of the staff at the IRTS facility suggested I look up Wellness in the Woods as a tool or support as he had heard some awesome things about them. I decided to add Wellness in the Woods to my list of at home peer mentoring sites to help me cope.

When I arrived home, I had joined another site and was attending several groups a day, until one day my peer support specialist came to do my weekly home visit and I was telling her about the resources I had and at that moment we decided to go on the Wellness in the Woods website. Now the wonderful thing about Wellness in the Woods is they have several “branches” to use and the peer support with VPSN (Virtual Peer Support Network) is available by Zoom from 9:00 am until 5:00 pm EVERYDAY!!!! There are no breaks in between, it is there for you when you need it. There are also other groups to use on Monday, Wednesday, and Fridays also along with the warmline which is available on the “off hours” through the evening and overnights.

Wellness in the Woods brought me stability, they gave me a reason, they supported me when I could not support myself, they gave me positivity and have helped me the most since I have returned home. There is not a day that goes by that I do not use one of the resources available

through Wellness in the Woods. Wellness in the Woods has become my second family and my greatest support, having them to help me through my recovery has been my life saver.

I ask that you please vote in favor of providing the funding needed to keep Wellness in the Woods going as I can attest to how wonderful of a program it is, also if you ever would like to come check it out for yourself, please do, you will not be let down.

Thank you for your time today.

Sincerely,

Danielle Rodriguez
Lake Bronson, MN
daniellerodriguez58201@yahoo.com
(218) 526-0343



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Dear Chair Noor, GOP Lead Schomacker, and Members of the Committee,

At this time in my life, I find it necessary to break my silence and advocate for an issue that deeply impacts individuals across our state: the need for sustainable funding and expansion of peer support services.

I have dedicated my career to mental health and wellness, working tirelessly in a field I am passionate about. However, like many others, I have experienced firsthand the toll of high stress and demanding work environments. A little over a year ago, I faced a crossroads—one that forced me to reassess my professional and financial future. It was during this transition that I found an opportunity with Wellness in the Woods, an organization that took a chance on me and has been a beacon of hope for so many.

Peer support is transformative. I have witnessed its impact through my own experiences and through the countless individuals who find solace, understanding, and guidance in these services. Yet, despite its proven effectiveness, peer support specialists—many of whom are living examples of resilience—do not receive a living wage. This is a reality that must change.

Recently, I was presented with a leadership opportunity in my previous field—one that would have secured financial stability and allowed me to maintain my home. However, I chose to stay in peer support because I believe in its mission and the exceptional leadership at Wellness in the Woods, which fosters growth, respect, and genuine human connection.

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The Virtual Peer Support Network is just one example of how this work changes lives. It provides a space where people feel heard without pressure, where facilitators encourage open dialogue, and where individuals find a sense of belonging. In a world that often feels chaotic, human connection is necessary. No one thrives in isolation.

We must begin to have the hard conversations about whole health and mental wellness. We must recognize that sustainable solutions—ones that lift individuals up, not merely offer short-term relief—are critical to building healthier communities. Peer support is one of those solutions. Expanding peer support roles in diverse settings would help address critical healthcare challenges while strengthening the mental health infrastructure statewide.

Wellness in the Woods plays a vital role in filling these gaps, reaching individuals in nearly every county across the state. The feedback is overwhelmingly positive, and the impact is undeniable. I urge you to support legislation that funds and expands peer support services, ensuring that individuals doing this essential work receive fair wages and that these programs continue to thrive.

As the saying goes, *nothing for us, without us*. Let's work together to create policies that truly represent and uplift all people, including those with disabilities. I appreciate your time and your dedication to serving our communities.

Sincerely,
LURA SOLIE
311 E THOMPSON ST
MANKATO, MN 56001
LURA@MNMWITW.ORG

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Dear Chair Noor, GOP Lead Schomacker, and Members of the Committee,

People in recovery need additional and accessible resources to maintain wellness. Relying solely on appointments with doctors, nurses, psychiatrists, or counselors, at times falls short of meeting these needs for maintaining good health, and then the burden shifts to emergency rooms or urgent care visits and increases costs.

The scheduling limitations of providers, and the financial burdens incurred by the state, or the individual demonstrate the importance of peer-to-peer resources like Wellness in the Woods. Whether it is recovery from addiction, incarceration, or maintaining day-to-day life while managing mental health challenges, Wellness in the Woods offers a critical lifeline, at no cost to the person served. It also reduces the financial burden of the state, by avoiding costly urgent care or emergency level care.

Wellness in the Woods is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year to help people manage their health, maintain their autonomy, recovery, and social connections. People who manage these challenges often face desperate levels of stigma and isolation. Wellness in the Woods breaks down stigma by offering hope for recovery and demonstrations of wellness through programming in a variety of peer support services.

Wellness in the Woods alleviates the isolation faced by so many peers, as they struggle with financial or other accessibility hurdles. The benefit and ease of logging into a community of caring supportive people must not be underestimated. It is a crucial lifeline for people working to maintain their wellness and recovery. Wellness in the Woods serves as a critical resource for those who

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call into the warmline, participate in virtual peer support networking via zoom, or join in the many recovery sessions geared to help people achieve and maintain sobriety.

Please do all you can to support HF487 and keep this vital resource available to the MN constituents who rely on these services.

Sincerely,
REBECCA SHOLES
RICHFIELD, MN

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Dear Chair Noor, GOP Lead Schomacker, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Susie. I work for Wellness in the Woods.

I know you are very busy but I hope you will take the time to read this.

We ask all our callers "Where would you go if there was no Warmline?"

Every person I talk to has basically the same answer.

"I have no one. I don't know what I would do. I would probably go crazy if it wasn't for you being there to listen. I would probably call 988 or the Crisis line."

We save lives. We save the state money. It costs about \$1-2,000 dollars a night for people to go to the psychiatric ward.

It's not just a matter of money. It's about treating people with dignity, compassion and hope.

I truly hope you will understand how important our group of dedicated employees can make this world a better place.

Humanity matters. People matter.

Sincerely,
SUSAN WETHERALL

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