

March 29, 2022

Dear Committee Members,

My name is Dorothy Bode. I am a resident of Hennepin County, the parent of 8 adopted and 3 biological children, and a Volunteers of America Certified Family Peer Specialist (CFPS) with the Wraparound Program. I chose to join the Wraparound program in January 2020 based on the belief that equipping and supporting parents as they learn to navigate children's mental health will directly lead to improved outcomes for both at risk youth and their families.

I speak from my own lived experience when I share that very few parents enter their child's mental health crisis with the tools necessary to advocate for and navigate the complex state and county systems that exist to help. Our systems are good. But they are also very confusing, heavily siloed, and have little accommodation for those who are newly in need of or require an increasingly higher level of mental health services. In 2010 when my son and I first waded into the deep pool that is extreme mental health, I was immediately over my head. Overnight I needed to secure my home, consider out-of-home placement, and protect him and the rest of the family from his terrifying mood swings. My partner buckled under the strain and like far too many parents dealing with their children's mental health challenges I became a single caregiver adrift in an ocean of paperwork, unpaid bills, unsuccessful treatments, and confusion. I was a highly educated and competent person unable to figure out which next steps to pursue for my child or even think beyond surviving each day. I had lost hope, vision and perspective as others made referrals and recommendations for my child based on little knowledge of our family, while I remained responsible for success or failure of the outcomes. I was done with it all and almost paralyzed into inaction. This is the time where I wish Wraparound had existed for my family and the place where I see the most amazing changes happening for families who have engaged with our Wraparound team.

Wraparound embodies the best of what we can offer families in crisis. By its nature it is strongly person centered, heavily focused on existing and emerging strengths and designed to break down the silos that isolate and perpetuate patterns within our current ways of supporting families. Wraparound is the framework which invites everyone who is committed to a youth and family's success to regularly come together, listen, learn, grow, and share in the work that we can do to help families get unstuck. When I see representatives from child protection, probation, case management, education, group homes, residential treatment and other areas meeting together with a youth, their family, and their informal supports, the decision-making power shifts back to the individual, walls come down and a new way of thinking and working together emerges.

It isn't easy. Many of the parents and youth we work with say they are simply 'done.' Nothing has worked, they feel worn down and exhausted by the impersonal nature of the systems they are trying to navigate, and they have almost lost hope. In Wraparound we simply ask for a chance to listen, get to know and help families build a team that will move forward with them. As strange as it seems, from the first meeting we practice saying goodbye to our families. We know that we are not a long-term solution, in fact, our goal is to work ourselves out of a job within 12-18 months. Not because that is what the guidelines say, but because families and youth who have support through Wraparound learn to navigate the mental health system, build a team of both formal and informal supports, and become confident advocating for what works best for them. When those things happen, it is time for them to move forward without us.

It also takes persistence and patience to bring each team's professionals into a place of collaboration. Just like parents, many are burned out and exhausted by the simple lack of options or success that a youth has encountered in the past. Some case managers, GAL's and CP workers have been with families for years, they care deeply about the situation and are relieved as the Wraparound process begins to allow the weight and responsibility they carry to be shared and a new type of dialogue to start with families.

Wraparound is the gathering of professional and nonprofessional support around a family as they move into, through and beyond crisis. It is a process that beautifully humanizes everyone involved and allows the best in each team member to grow. I am committed to Wraparound and the families we partner with. For the hard days, when I just cannot see any progress for a youth, or a team hits a wall we did not expect. I keep a series of post-it notes on my bulletin board that remind me of the benefit we bring to each family when we don't give up. Here are a few of them.

"I do not want Wraparound to end (at a last meeting), you gave me hope for my family and I no longer feel like everything is spinning out of control. You taught me to trust you and want you to know you changed our life." (Parent of Youth 2022)

"I avoided it, everything. I was afraid of what happened to me when I was a teen in a lock down facility. I could not find my voice to help my grandson when he was being hurt, but you spoke for me and helped him. I feel less scared. I feel like we are safe." (Guardian of Youth, 2020)

"This is good, I really like it. I was skeptical about the value of Wrap for this family and did not want to do it, because honestly, I did not think anything could help. But I see things changing. I am a supporter of Wraparound now." (CP Worker 2021)

There are many more. Each one a reminder of the unique place that Wraparound can have in a family's difficult journey through mental health. Each one supporting the idea that we can partner with families as they learn and develop skills moving forward into their own realities and hopefully, in the future watch as they become advocates and support to other families in need.

Thank you for listening and caring about our MN youth and families who need the sort of help that Wraparound can offer.

Warmly,

Dorothy Bode

CFPS Wraparound Volunteers of America