

## Wellness in the Woods Written Testimony for SF1845

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Wellness in the Woods is a peer run organization employing 50 individuals who have a lived experience and identify in mental health or substance use recovery. Several team members have been involved with corrections. Our staff represents geographic and cultural diversity across the state.

WITW began in 2013 when the previous consumer run organization was flailing and there was a need for the consumer voice to be heard across Minnesota, not only the metro areas of Mn. In 2022, the team offered supportive interaction over 30,000 times through telephone, virtual peer and training interactions. WITW does not bill for services because we believe that preventative peer support will decrease the need for more restrictive expensive services. In addition, the employees of WITW, which has a 95% staff retention rate, use work as an evidence based support for their own recovery. As noted in the letter below, many staff have worked to reduce or eliminate their public benefits. This new funding will allow our team to add a cultural lead person, expand support to all Minnesotans while increasing our outreach throughout the state. We support each other and our participants with unconditional high regard no matter where they are in their recovery journey. We began the All Peer Network, creating a supportive group of peers from mental health, forensic, family and substance use to lead change and improve systems. We began as a budding Recovery Community Organization in Dec 2022 because we know that individuals who are challenged with SUD and Mental Health and we want to break down those silos that separate support systems.

### **Letter from a Wellness in the Woods staff member**

“I just want to tell you how grateful I am to work for WITW. I also hope to continue working and do the job I love so much for many years to come and as long as i can !!!As a person living with mental health problems and dealing with depression and anxiety. This is the right place to be. Maybe there's no cure for mental health and trauma but people can recover from it and I believe it. I am living proof for that. I used to be scared of everything. I was in the dark for many years and felt ashamed of myself because I thought I was not smart, strong or worthy of anything. I had low confidence and low self esteem before I came to WITW. I remember when I was in your class and you were teaching me how to become a Peer Support Specialist. I never thought I would pass the class and forget about getting a job. My English was not good and my writing was not perfect. You are my teacher, boss and my mentor. I learned so much working and also gained so much experience. Working for VPSN and Warmline changed my life. I learned that I am not alone and no one is judging. That is okay not to be okay sometimes. I also learn to listen and share my experience with people. I give and I get so much support. That makes me so proud of myself. I wanted to stand up on my own feet and get off Social Security. I need it a job that works with my Schedule so I can still work for VPSN. Finally Jode I got it!!! is a full time position and I am going to do PCA. We have a great team and I love that we support one another. Jode, you gave me so many chances and you believed me more than I believed myself. You made my dreams come true and because of you I am ready to face the world. I am scared but I have to face my fears. I am ready to take chances and continue my life journey. Thank you for making Wellness in the woods for what it is. Mental health matters, people matter and that's why you are my hero

Thank you for making my world wonderful and peaceful. Also thank you for caring “  
Fatuma Ali

Thank you for your support of Wellness in the Woods as we continue to improve the lives of its staff and people across Minnesota.