

Public Testimony Received on Task Force Website, 6/3/2022

- **1st Response:** My name is Zachary G., I am a father, a partner, a student, and a person in recovery from Methamphetamine Addiction. Since I decided to change my life forever in August of 2020 I have devoted my life to sharing my experience, strength, and hope with those who are still suffering in a life of addiction. I went back to school to become a Social Worker, and LADC at Bemidji State University and have maintained a 4.0. I have become very active in the local NA community and sponsor other men. I have just completed my CPRS training and will be taking my test on March 17th to complete that. In October of last year, I was hired at a treatment center where I live in Grand Rapids MN to work as a monitor. When I completed the background study I was disqualified for 3 separate felony drug charges, (2) 5th-degree possessions, and (1) 3rd-degree sale. The most recent offense(A 5th-degree possession) took place in August of 2020 and was what inspired me to change my life for good. I requested a set-aside, and turned the 21-page packet I was sent into 74 pages in response to the questions. I included letters from Teen Challenge indicating the amazing progress I made, A local non-profit I volunteer for, a representative from Bemidji State University, a letter of compliance from my probation officer, and my NA sponsor describing how I am an asset to the community. I also included all supporting documentation that was requested. I was denied for the set aside because of how recent my latest charge was, and the severity of my previous sales charge. As a result of this I was let go from working at the treatment center. I am currently in the middle of another background study for my school, and will have more to come before too long as I need to seek internships for both the Social Work and LADC programs. The current background study process will continue to disqualify me, and I will continue to work hard to prove to the world that I am not that addict I once was. I have a lot to offer the field, and can and will be a huge asset when I am done with school and allowed to practice. If changes were made to the disqualifying process that looked at who I am today, what I have to offer others who have yet to climb out from underneath their addiction, and how far my self and others have progressed since taking our lives back it would greatly benefit not only us, but society as a whole. My email is [redacted], my phone number is [redacted] if there is anything I do to help make the changes that this field so desperately needs please feel free to reach out. Thank you for the work your doing, God Bless!
- **2nd Response:** My family member was convicted of a felony at age 18, and he is now 41 years old. He has not had any additional charges since serving his time as a young adult. He has struggled for years in trying to find employment that is a right fit for him. His passion is in helping the disabled or at-risk. The only employment he has been able to find and hold is in the trades, which has been harder to bear for him physically. Last year he found a job working as a direct support provider for adults in a group home. He was thrilled, and I have never seen his self-esteem so high as when he was offered a position. He truly loved the work. A week after he was hired, he was abruptly terminated because his background check came back, and it was determined that due to the nature of his felony greater than 20 years before, he could not work in that facility. He was a troubled teenage kid on methamphetamines, made a terrible mistake (robbed a local store), was convicted, and served his time. He got clean in prison and never returned to that lifestyle. 20+ years later he is being denied the ability to do work that he is passionate about, because a law dictates that he can never pass a MN DHS background check. He is being punished for the rest of his life and limited in what work he can do, settling for minimum wage or back breaking labor. There is a huge shortage of direct support workers, and this is work he desperately wanted to do. I strongly feel that these rules should be reassessed. I am sure there are many like him who

have been law-abiding for decades who continue to be stigmatized and punished - despite serving their sentences.

- **3rd Response:** My name is Taylor H. I struggled with binge drinking alcohol from the very first time I tried it at 15. I used it as an escape and a way to cope with the rejection, bullying and depression I experienced throughout middle and high school. Things came to a head when I was 20 years old and got into a domestic dispute with my dad. I had been drinking one evening at his house and had invited a friend over without his permission. At the time I was incorrigible, selfish and mad at the world. In an attempt to get my friend to leave his house, my dad pulled out a baseball bat. I took the bat from my dad and popped him in the back of the leg. That split second decision in my drunkenness has followed me for the past 11 years. My step mom called the police to come de-escalate the situation. My dad told them that he just wanted my friend to leave and for the rest of us to go in the house and to bed. In my interaction with the police I was verbally combative, angry. They ended up arresting me. I was charged with second degree assault with a deadly weapon. A felony offense. My dad wrote letters to the prosecutor asking her not charge me with this level of offense and that it was a domestic dispute amongst family, but it was no use. I ended up pleading guilty to the charge and had to serve 1 year in the workhouse. At least it wasn't prison. I eventually got to go through the long-term program at Mn Adult and Teen Challenge. Finding my faith and the programming there significantly changed my life and these past 9 years in recovery have truly been a gift. That deal I took kept me out of prison, but it has had far harsher consequences for me throughout the past 10 years. I want to be able to give back to the organization that has helped give me a life and helped me into recovery. I want to be able to come alongside the clients at Minnesota adult and Teen Challenge and share that there is hope. That they can come out of addiction. I want to be able to mentor clients and young people. I am a certified personal trainer and I want to be able to coach youth and train them for their sports. I am unable to do all of this because of my disqualification due to 245.c.15 This disqualification has prevented me from numerous jobs, and so much more over the past 8 years. I will forever regret the choice I made and the harm I caused my father, but I am sharing my story with you in hopes that we can find a way to allow people like me another chance at a full life and to be able to give back. Thank you
- **4th Response:** I've been working in health and human services field since 2008 and have been convicted of numerous felonies in the 90s I have submitted over 15 DHS background studies, every one of them resulting in a set aside I am unable to rent anywhere where they use renter services I can literally not live anywhere in the United States with out selling my story to a private party. It's latterly impossible to move around and higher up. I'm continually condemned for conviction to occurred at this time 30 years ago. Edward W. [redacted] work mobile [redacted] personal [redacted]
- **5th Response:** I was convicted of a felony in 2011 when I was struggling deeply with mental illness and addiction. My case received media attention and painted a much more sinister motive for my crimes than the one I knew to be true. Gratefully, my case was adjudicated through mental health court, which allowed me to receive treatment for my illness instead of prison time. However, it was after I completed my sentence that I faced the most significant barriers. I was refused employment at Home Depot due to my record. I was denied housing at an apartment complex even though I proffered a folder with 10 letters supporting my good character. I was told by employees at the Workforce Center that I should not pursue my dream of becoming a clinical social worker because I would not pass the licensing

requirements. After working retail for years, I realized that volunteering was the only way I was going to be able to start doing the work I so desperately wanted to do, so I began sharing my story with the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), Mental Health Minnesota, and other local mental health organizations. Eventually, this led to a paid position as a Certified Peer Support Specialist, which reignited my desire to become a clinical social worker. Surely others had traversed this path and succeeded? Upon enrolling at St. Catherine University, I quickly found this was not the case. No one at my school has attempted to do what I am currently attempting to do: pursue a degree in clinical social work with a felony record. My field work professor encouraged me to obtain employment through a social services agency, which I did. This process took 3 months as I needed to gather evidence in order to get DHS to approve a "set-aside" for my conviction so I could work directly with clients. Despite my success in obtaining the set-aside, I still face significant challenges as I continue to pursue the long and winding road toward licensure. Firstly, set-asides are only granted for the individual position, meaning if I change jobs I will need to go through the entire process once again. Secondly, my felony record has made it challenging to find internship opportunities despite my extensive experience working in the field. Some organizations are not willing to work with someone who has a felony, even one that is over a decade old. Thirdly, a DHS set-aside does not guarantee social work licensure. This decision is up to the board, and will require a special hearing for someone in my situation. Finally, the reaches of the DHS disqualification last for many years past the initial crime. I will not be able to pass a DHS background check without obtaining a set-aside for another 9 years. That will be 20 years after the crime was committed, 19 years after I received proper mental health treatment, and 15 years after the completion of my sentence. This is far too long. With a shortage of mental health providers, we ought to be finding a way for people who have paid their debts to society to give back, not continuing to restrict them from service. I have no idea whether or not I will be able to obtain licensure or even procure a clinical internship when I begin my master's program. Despite the risks, I am continuing to pursue my dream, not only for myself but to inspire others who may be feeling discouraged from following theirs. I am just one example of someone who has worked hard to overcome these hardships and reclaim my life; so many people who have struggled with mental illness and addiction feel trapped by the poor decisions they made when they were unwell. When are we going to stop punishing people who have done all that has been asked of them? We can and must do better. Jenna E. [redacted]

- **6th Response:** I am a licensed alcohol and drug counselor in rural Minnesota for 4 1/2 years. Upon completion of my college training, I had to contact another state for past charges related to past addiction. I was not able to pass the background check for about 6 months which was a barrier to getting started in behavioral health. I was an addict for 30+ years and am now reaching my 10th year of sobriety in August, 2022. This path of addictions counseling is my calling, and I provide care to women clients who desperately need help. This disease of addiction is killing thousands of people who need help. Please consider those that enter this field and have a past history are dedicated individuals giving back the best way they know how. Thank you, Lisa S., LADC. [redacted]
- **7th Response:** My name is Paige, I am a 28 year old female. In December of 2018 I was convicted of two felonies, felony first degree drug sales and felony failure to appear. Since being convicted I completed a 13 month program at Rochester MN Adult and Teen Challenge Long term program. After completing the program I became a Recovery Coach in the long term program where I worked under supervision in the process of my background study. Once I summited the paperwork for a set aside I received an answer from DHS in less then 24 hours. This was a huge blessing! During this time I met my current husband which

led me to move out of the Rochester area and to Kanabec County. It took about 6 months of being in Kanabec County to find employment where I could help others in recovery again. I was given an opportunity to work at Meadow Creek in Pine City, MN. The background study and set aside went fairly quick which again I was very grateful for. The passion I have for client care and helping others in recovery is strong. While I was happy to be making an impact and working with others at Meadow Creek, the client care that lacked brought concerns and left me not feeling good after work. Always wishing the current clients were being given the care that they needed and instead being overworked with trying to get as many admits in the door a day which took away from the current clients. This is what led me to look into employment at Recovering Hope Treatment Center, I was offered a job as a recovery advocate. I was in love from the first day. Not only was I working with women in recovery but I was helping them build relationships with their children. The atmosphere was inviting and it is still a joy to be employed with Recovering Hope. While I work well in a team, I am a person that likes to be on the floor with the clients interacting. When under supervision I am unable to go without another staff member which at times limit the opportunity to be interactive with clients. In this field (and many others) there is a shortage for workers, and with that when there are two staff members that have to stay by each other at all times and the high demand on clients needs creates difficulty as well frustration to not just the staff but clients. They question why it is two staff can not separate to get their needs met, which in my opinion is valid. I was employed in January of 2022, and still have not heard anything on the background study, not even the denial. HR and myself have contacted DHS background division, where there has been no progress on the study. I was offered a position inside of the company, went through both interviews and was ready to be hired into the new roll. Due to my background study not being completed and I would be working more independently I was not able to take the position. The last time that HR talked to the DHS background division it was said "we are too backed up, it will not be looked at until August at the earliest". While this was discouraging, I continue to work and serve clients with a positive attitude. I would like to mention that I have not had a single violation on probation, my current probation officer wanted to let me off. The county I was convicted in wants half the time to be completed first. In December 2023 I will be eligible to submit early release, this would be half time due to no violations. I have not been pulled over once. In September I will have 4 years clean and sober. My hope is that in the future the process of a person with no new convictions gets a quick turn around on background studies if they have had a previous set aside. I am grateful that I have been given the opportunities to work with others in recovery. Thank you for your time! Paige G. B. [redacted] [redacted]