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February 1, 2023

Statement of Purpose

Just a few years into recovery from opioid use disorder, I was given the opportunity to start helping people as an avocation. My eight-year recovery journey and my job have led me to pursue a master's degree in Public Administration at The Evergreen State College. My passion for advocacy and policy work came together as part of Recovery Advocacy Day in 2019 in Olympia, Washington. There I saw that my lived experience is needed to create a more holistic picture of who people in recovery are. Working in the Methadone Clinic at the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department, I have learned that change comes from inside systems. Addressing stigma, advocating for equity, and empowering communities to thrive creates better health outcomes and safer communities.

Two semesters before I was set to graduate from Montana State University-Billings I broke my leg. I was working for a wholesale optical lab in customer service. My short-term goal after graduation was to continue a path toward sales and management where I was working. Unfortunately, I was caught in the torrent of over prescription of opioids which combined with other factors led to my opioid use disorder. I experienced homelessness, justice system involvement, health problems, and a total loss of friends and family. I went to inpatient treatment after becoming pregnant and started methadone treatment at the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department. It was there I was empowered to help others and share my story. My work was

noticed, and I was offered a job as the first Recovery Coach/Peer Counselor at the Health Department.

In new employee orientation, I was shocked to learn that a person's zip code can have a greater significance in determining health outcomes than family history. I started to see some clients succeed in obtaining resources whereas others struggled. I recognized stigma and continued to coach advocacy and provide education and support to connect clients to health and recovery supports. But I saw differences in success for another reason. When the social determinants of health were introduced to my work, my eyes were opened that inequity in systems not only affects the quality of life and personal wellness but also prevents communities from becoming healthier.

Growing up, I always had housing, food, transportation, and access to good education. The absence of experiencing racism, violence, and discrimination contributed to the opportunities I experienced growing up. What I saw in my work were social, economic, and racial inequities contributing to barriers some clients were experiencing. For instance, methadone is an effective treatment for opioid use disorder. A person without access to transportation faces a barrier that someone with a vehicle does not. Helping a client through the barrier with a connection to a transportation program provides equity to the individual facing the barrier to help them reach the same goal-methadone treatment and recovery.

Meeting with local, state, and national policymakers has inspired me to work for change from a different place than I had planned. As a member of the Pierce County Opioid Task Force, I speak for the Anti-Stigma Committee. I have an outlet for advocacy and a chance to educate people about opioid use disorder and combat stigma. As chair of the Task Force's Transportation committee, I spearheaded a small ad campaign about Narcan with Pierce Transit. Learning how

to chair a committee, work on a budget and collaborate with multiple agencies are a few of the skills I've learned.

My work addressing health disparities was recognized with the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department's 2022 Deputy Director's Award. The award goes to a recipient who: inspires creativity and innovation, generates unique solutions, sets meaningful expectations, achieves extraordinary results, and puts superior effort into work. I participated in planning and implementing the Recovery Coach and Community Health Worker (CHW) program and helped write agency policies around the work. Our CHW program is the first of its kind in Washington State among opioid treatment providers.

The person who championed the CHW Program is my program manager and my mentor. She is a graduate of The Evergreen State College MPA Program and told me how she came to her current work and why she went to Evergreen. She showed me how my lived experience with substance use disorder and recovery gives me a unique perspective to bring new ideas to address stigma. The impact of advocacy coming from a person who has struggled to meet basic needs is different than someone who has not experienced these trials. My lived experience with leadership and communication skills makes me an effective proponent of creating equity for marginalized community members.

The Evergreen State College has coursework that will empower me to address change from inside systems. Armed with this new education, I will be prepared to challenge policies like the Tacoma Camping Ban Ordinance, and propose solutions. I am working to help people with opioid use disorder advocate to be treated like a person who has diabetes. Both are chronic diseases, but their victims are viewed differently by society. I have been empowered to pursue my dream of higher education with a passion and direction for the work I want to do.

Understanding the systems that need to change is the first step, and learning how is the second. I hope to pursue a master's degree in Public Administration to learn how to make meaningful changes to ensure access to essential needs and services for everyone.