

Dear Legislators:

April 2, 2019

My name is Terria Vandenhuerk (also known as Walters). I am a person in long-term recovery from opioid addiction. I am writing this letter in support of HB89. I will share a short testimony of why I am in support of this bill.

In 1996 I was attacked by a pit bull and taken to the Palmer hospital emergency department for injuries I sustained from this attack. The emergency room doctor prescribed me an opioid pain medication for these injuries. I was not informed by the doctor that the medication was addictive.

This prescription led to severe problems for me down the road. I immediately became addicted to the euphoric feeling I got when I took the pills and once I ran out I began asking around if anyone knew where to get pills off the street. This was during the time Oxycontin was becoming popular and being widely used for pain. I found someone who was getting Oxycontin prescribed to them and I began buying them from him. I did not know they were addictive nor did I know that this would lead to years and years of me struggling to quit.

One day I ran out of pills after I had been buying them daily and for months. I could not obtain the pills so I went about my day.... 24 hours passed and I started getting so sick I thought I was going to die. I thought I had the flu but quickly figured out I was in withdrawal. How did I find out? The people I was using with told me that was what I was going through. I was desperate to stop the pain I was experiencing and the cravings I was having. This began a repeated cycle to daily find my fix so that I wouldn't become sick. My addiction got so bad that I graduated to snorting the pills and then injecting them.

I then heard about a doctor in Anchorage that prescribed pain medication like it was candy. I was also told that if I showed him my track marks he would write me a prescription for pain pills. What was said about him was true. I walked out of his office with prescriptions for Oxycontin, oxycodone and methadone. This began my journey of "doctor shopping". Not only did I doctor shop but I also sold the pills I got to people who were also seeking to "get well". My diagnosis was for pain management for my back.

I found another doctor (PA) who also was willing to write me a prescription for pain medication. This PA prescribed me morphine and methadone. I will never forget about the amount because not only could I maintain my addiction I could also make loads of money off my methadone so I could buy heroin off the streets. He was prescribing me 10mg methadone pills. I was to take 7 pills three times a day=630 pills a month. The morphine (Kadian) was 100mg pills. I was to take 1 pill three times a day=90 pills a month.

As time went on I was growing tired of having to wake up and live my life inside a pill bottle and chasing the "dope sack". I wanted off this medication and out of the lifestyle. I went to my doctor and told him I wanted off. He was adamant that I needed to be on it for the rest of my life saying I needed it for pain management. I begged him to get me off of the medication. I had reached a point where I was "done". I hated my life and wanted to be sober. I envied people that didn't have to wake up trapped inside their own bodies and inside a pill just to feel normal.

I tried detoxing myself but it was awful. I had seizures, I was dizzy, I couldn't eat, I puked, I had anxiety and pain so debilitating that I couldn't take it. I continued to use. I had taken myself to the emergency room many times but was treated horribly by the doctors and their staff (after all I was a drug addict; the scum of the earth) and sent home with nothing.

In the summer of 2004 I was desperate. My ex-husband told me meth would help with my withdrawal so I tried it expecting to only use it for a couple weeks to get through the detox. Yes, I had the same symptoms as I did before but my dopamine levels from the meth use and the amped up feeling got me through BUT..... Because I'm an addict.....

Although I had gotten off the opioids by using meth I couldn't stop using it so thus... I traded one drug for another. I became a full blown meth addict. I was hanging around a guy that was cooking it and while he was cooking it he was teaching me how to make it. I eventually started making my own meth for personal use (small amounts; 1-2 grams at a time). I was not selling it but was only making it to keep up my habit.

In early 2005....Eight months after I started using meth I was arrested and charged with manufacturing and for allowing my teenage son to use drugs too. I felt like my life was over. I was so ashamed of myself and hated what I had become. I had prayed over and over that God would take my addictions away from me. I hated what I had put my son through and for allowing him to use drugs too.

In August of 2007 I was sentenced to 20 years in prison. As I write this letter today.... April 2, 2005 is my sobriety date. I have not used meth or opioids since then.

I'm sharing all of this with you because I think it is important for all of you to know that I am just one story.... I am one of millions who are or have walked my path.

I think that it is important that medical health providers that prescribe these medications be educated not only on its addictive nature but also where this can lead. I think it important for prescribing doctors/PA's to have accountability for their practices. There needs to be more education on "doctor shopping", who really is in need of pain medication and if the medication is prescribed the doctors need to be trained and educated on withdrawal management. If they are willing to prescribe they should be willing to detox. Here we are in 2019 and most doctors still do not know how to properly administer withdrawal management. I have educated physicians on withdrawal management and have been called on numerous times to help with a patient who has overdosed or is seeking detox. It's unfortunate that while they prescribe they don't know how to get the patient off of the medication once addicted.

I ask not only HB89 be passed but also to consider submitting a bill that requires prescribing physicians to be educated in withdrawal management and know how to get their patients off the medication they put them on. Prevention is the key. Imagine if I would have been given the help that I begged for I would not have been sentenced to 20 years in prison for a non-violent drug offense. If you have any questions feel free to reach out to me.

Sincerely,
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