

DATE: February 11, 2020

TO: Appropriations Committee

FROM: Lawani Dawkins, Willimantic CT- Inmate and Resident of Next Program at Perception Programs

RE: H.B. 5005 An Act Adjusting The State Budget For The Biennium Ending June 30, 2021: Judicial & Corrections and Conservation & Development Budgets

Good evening Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Formica, Representative Lavielle and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee,

Hello my name is Lawani Dawkins. I live in Cottage House, which is a work release program funded by DOC and run by Perception Program in Willimantic, CT. When I entered the doors of Perception Programs I was broken. I didn't have a clue of who I was or what my purpose was. I didn't have anyone to turn to. I lived at Grace House for mental health issues. I started doing groups, opening to staff and peers. I ran peer meetings, which helped me open, which was hard because I didn't trust nobody. I was able to get medications that I needed and began to trust my own decisions. Entering Grace House was my new beginning.

From there I went Next Step where I participated in more groups, began to share my story, began to understand why my life became unmanageable and learned skills to begin to make better choices. I learned patience, which I had struggles with, but they (the struggles) didn't make me go backwards. I was able to look for a job and found employment at McDonalds. **That was my first legal job ever.** Next Step was a bigger house than Grace House, this was hard in the beginning, but I learned from staff some skills to cope.

I learned while working with our Budget Specialist how to use my money wisely. I have learned how to use some tools to help me make the right decisions. I also received help with my self-esteem, trauma, abuse, how to believe in myself to just name a few.

I recently moved to Cottage, which is a part of Next Step. I am learning how to say things in the right way, how to give to others what was so freely given to me. I try to encourage others, that anything is possible as long as you believe in it. There's a lot of things to focus on, and I leaned to focus on the best. The past is old, the future is ahead. I am so grateful for the opportunity to have a better life. Without this house without giving me a place to live, I would have been homeless, or using drugs and alcohol. The staff who wanted the best for me, they gave me opportunities that I didn't think I could ever get. The opportunities to speak my voice and be heard and to take advantage of what the houses have to offer. This is a great chance for me. I am so grateful for the staff, they showed me the things I need to learn to live in society. You can make it if you try, and I learned that at Next Step.

Please increase funding to these programs so more people can benefit like I did!

Thank you-

Lawani Dawkins, Willimantic CT