



September 22, 2021

National Recovery Month is Personal For Me

National Recovery Month (Recovery Month) is a national observance held every September to educate Americans that substance use treatment and mental health services can enable those with a mental and/or substance use disorder to live a healthy and rewarding life. President Biden has proclaimed September 2021 as National Recovery Month.

This week I was honored to receive the Mark Sanders Commitment to Advocacy Award from the Illinois Association of Addiction Professionals, an affiliate chapter of the National Association of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Counselors, at the Above and Beyond Family Recovery Center on the West Side. Many of us have worked together in advocacy not only for legislation, but also in founding the West Side Heroin/Opioid Task Force 5 years ago and working with Prevention Partnership to ensure that Narcan, or naloxone, gets in the hands of community members who can reverse an overdose from heroin or other opioids so lives can be saved. We also work together to provide options for people who would like treatment at all levels of care. I am grateful to be part of this work, which will continue and will expand to fill the need.

I will continue to advocate for people for in recovery, especially for those on the West Side of Chicago. But, the situation we find ourselves in touches all of us, regardless of the color of your skin, how much money you have, or what community you live in, or what your family situation is – you have been impacted. I am willing to bet that every family has someone in their family who has struggled with addiction and substance use disorder. We are in this together.

When we drive down the street and see people struggling with a substance use disorder, we have to be concerned and not just bitter or judgmental – the problem is in plain view. And yet, we don't treat it as a problem in plain view.

I used to say, "Just say no" to drugs. What I have learned is that we have to meet people where they are at. But, there are some people who say they want to use drugs – what do we say to them? We just love them and meet them where they are at. Meeting someone where they are means bridging the gap between your own expectations and where the other person is coming from, according to Dawn Perez. It means intentionally listening to understand their values, needs, desires, and even their trauma-responses. It doesn't mean just leaving the person where they are, but listening to see how that person can achieve that better version of themselves that they may want.

I have lost many people in my family to the addiction of heroin - my favorite uncle and my favorite cousin are just two. My biological mother struggled with substance use disorder with heroin for her entire life.

Every family will recognize the story of someone in their family who is struggling with substance use always asking for money. My biological mother used to take money given by our family and then we wouldn't see her for days while she was out on the streets. But I will never forget the time when my biological mother said "I need \$50" at a family barbeque in the backyard, and I thought, "Oh Lord!" She said, "I want to go buy a phone from the gas station." Well, I had the money, so I gave her the 50 bucks to go buy a phone, but I wasn't sure what would really happen, though I thought I knew given what had happened in the past. But the amazing thing was that later she came back, without the phone, and gave me the money back, and she said, "they didn't have one."

I thought, "Hallelujah!" We as a family then knew that she had arrived - that with the help of counseling and methadone and the continued loving acceptance of our family, that she wasn't going to use street drugs the way she used to use them. That was a very big success for our family because she never took from our family again, and that was a change in all of my family's lives. I am so grateful to say that because of her life, my life and my whole family's life are better.

Recovery is possible, and there is always hope. Let's promote National Recovery Month and work and fight together to give people what they need in their recovery efforts to make a better life for themselves and their families.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'LSK', with a stylized flourish at the end.

La Shawn K. Ford
State Representative-Eighth District