

**Testimony of Albert Wright before the
Joint Senate Task Force on Opioids, Addiction & Overdose Prevention
Albany Hearing, November 15th, 2019**

Good morning everyone, my name is Albert Wright and I thank you for the opportunity to present my testimony here today. I was born in Brooklyn and just this week I turned 73 years old. I have been affiliated with drugs for most of my life. I could have had a normal life, but I had certain problems that I had to deal with, including abuse of different kinds when I was a child, I didn't know how to deal with some of the things that I had to face—so I would get high. That was my escape. I was using in order to escape my reality.

Once I did heroin—that was it. That was in the late 70s. I went cold turkey and got off of it, but I started shooting cocaine ten years later, and I drank. I kept running from my problems, but they were still there, and I kept trying to take drugs to get away from them. I would go to rehab and when I came back from the rehab, I could talk about all my other truths but never about the abuse I faced. That was the thing that was holding me back from respecting myself.

The first time I ever went to jail, I was going to school and had a part time job. I stayed in jail for six months. They gave me three years of probation. I went to Rikers Island—when they had the ferry, they didn't even have the bridge. From then on, I hated and feared police, period. Later on, when I was on a lot of heroin, I turned myself in after robbing a bank.

When I was in jail, I would help people read and write. I even learned some law by going to the law library. I never gave up on myself. But in the State prison there were no services, no social workers.

When I first came to Housing Works it was a safe place to get high. But they talked with me and helped me with what I needed. Housing was first—I was surviving but I wasn't able to live. I didn't have a place to cook or do laundry. They helped with both my physical health and my mental health. Incarceration, stigma, and shame didn't help with my underlying issues. But services did.

When I was using heroin, I used to go to shooting galleries. I used to travel all the way to the Bronx. I have HIV and I've had it for decades. When I close my eyes I can remember. Back in the day, there was no way to inject drugs that was safe. I don't want the younger people to go through what I went through. When I was using, I was so ashamed of what I was doing, that I forgot about the people behind me, who I could help out. So I'm here today to try to help them now.

We must pass the Overdose Prevention Center Act and start a pilot program of five OPCs in New York State. Overdose prevention centers will help save people's lives. They will provide what I never had -- a safe place to use, not the streets or shooting galleries, clean supplies, as well as other services, social workers who can talk to people while they're still using drugs, before they go to jail.

Passing this bill won't cure everything, but I think it will be a big help, a help to people's mental health. As I said, incarceration, stigma, and shame, do not help people who use drugs. I believe a

safe place to use drugs, will help. If you pass this bill, you will help the next generation do better than I'm doing. And I'll vote for you next year.

Thank you, Senators, for listening to my testimony. I feel proud to be here today to share my story with you, to represent Housing Works, and do the right thing, to do what I can to help myself and to help others. I would like to end with an excerpt from "Stay in My Corner".