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## **Oregonians in addiction recovery making positive contributions to society**

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This guest opinion is by Karen Wheeler, addictions policy and development administrator, Addictions and Mental Health Division, Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS).

Most Oregonians know someone with a serious alcohol or drug problem; the state ranks high nationally in this area. But what many folks don't know is that there are thousands of Oregonians in long-term recovery from addiction to alcohol and other drugs – and they're quietly making a positive contribution to society.

They're holding down jobs, paying taxes, raising healthy children, getting involved in neighborhood, school and church activities – and helping others in recovery. This has a ripple effect – improving the lives of individuals and their families and creating better communities. The road to recovery from addiction is a difficult one, but the payoff for those who persevere is freedom from the bondage of drugs or alcohol.

These Oregonians deserve our recognition and thanks because it takes discipline, commitment and time to recover from addiction. That's why we support Gov. Ted Kulongoski's proclamation of September as Alcohol and Drug Addiction Recovery Month in Oregon.

The numbers are staggering; approximately 260,000 adult and 99,000 adolescent Oregonians have substance use disorders. Last year 60,000 adults and kids received substance abuse services. Untreated addiction costs Americans more than 100,000 lives and \$400 billion annually.

Scientists tell us that addiction is a chronic, relapsing brain disease. Addiction's side effects include serious physical, emotional, social and financial consequences that reach into every Oregon community. But there's a silver lining – addiction can be successfully treated and managed like diabetes, asthma or other chronic conditions.

### A story of success

One recovery success story is Carla Ayres, a mother from Eugene who used methamphetamine for more than a decade, but turned her life around and has advocated for people in recovery for the past 12 years. She vividly remembers taking that first step on the pathway to long-term recovery.

"I love my children and wanted to give them what they deserved – a good mother who is both emotionally and physically available to them," she said. "I wanted the crazy lifestyle to stop!"

Ayres estimates that her addiction cost the community hundreds of thousands of dollars in public assistance, food stamps, incarceration, extraordinary dental care, public health, bad debt, auto accidents, emergency room visits, police and court costs, and more.

These days she's giving back to the community as program manager for Catholic Community Services of Lane County, where she works with the recovery community. She serves on the Governor's Methamphetamine Task Force and represents the national advocacy group Faces and Voices of Recovery.

"I speak publicly about treatment and recovery issues because it is important that people realize that recovery happens and treatment works, and there are many paths to recovery," she said.

Oregon's addiction treatment programs are giving people a new lease on life and mending the social fabric of communities unraveled by alcohol and drugs. There are many avenues to recovery – from self-help, peer-to-peer programs, and medication assistance, to traditional, faith- or culturally-based treatments.

One thing we've learned is that jail isn't the best place for addressing addictions, and there are many who suggest that behavioral health disorders shouldn't be criminalized. Every dollar spent on drug treatment in the community returns about \$18.50 in benefits in terms of reduced incarceration rates and associated crime costs to taxpayers.

The health professionals, therapists, counselors and peers who provide treatment and supports for addictions also deserve our recognition and thanks for the important work they do in renewing lives.

Alcohol and Drug Addiction Recovery Month brings light to one of Oregon's most enduring and difficult problems. But any day is a good day to give some friendly encouragement to a relative, friend or neighbor who is on the road to recovery from addiction.

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