

May 10, 2020

Richmond City Council:

As a Richmond city resident I'd like to make a statement regarding my experiences with the Richmond Public Defenders Office and the Mental Health Docket.

June 21, 2015 my mentor, father figure, and boss was killed crossing the street while we were in North Carolina for an annual event. I went back home with his things and did my best to keep an already evident drinking problem under control, manage work without him there to lead, and process the events that were unfolding daily.

January 1, 2016 I was admitted to a mental health hospital for a suicide attempt after the business had decided it would close.

December 14, 2016 I was arrested while I was on the way home after purchasing a length of rope while heavily intoxicated.

December 15, 2016 Suicide Attempt

I had just opened a small studio in Richmond in June 2016 to do my work. I worked tirelessly since I recovered in January to start building a new foundation for myself. Constant set backs, losing the place I was living twice, financial hardship associated with opening a starting business all deteriorated my mental health. In turn that escalated my drinking which in turn continued to deteriorate my mental health.

I was offered an option in court for a Public Defender which I qualified for. At the time I had just gotten out of the hospital for the second time after voluntarily committing myself after being arrested. I was living in the back of my studio, because my room mates were so afraid of me. I was showering at the YMCA. I was scared, alone, vulnerable, and weak.

The first time I remember feeling hope again was in my meeting for the first time with my Public Defender.

I had expected a curt, emotionless, and robotic Public Defender looking at me from the tip of their nose quickly going over my paper work and systematically getting me out of their office as fast as I had come.

But I was wrong. What I was met with was confidence. Options. A chance to make things right. A chance to start over, even if it was the third time. I was kept in the loop and managed very well. Once I had met with them I didn't feel so alone anymore. When you feel like you still want to be a good person, but know that no-one at this point should believe in you. It was a powerful feeling to know that I had the public defender there with me to help.

I was enrolled in the mental health docket. I would have to stay on probation for a duration of time, and was required to attend therapy, group therapy and pass drug and alcohol screening. If none of those conditions were met, I would face the charges against me.

My road started there. I went to RBHA for intake and attended group therapy. The services they offered were invaluable. It was small and more personal. I was also able to get check ups from the doctor, maintain my medication, and maintain my sobriety. The mental health docket department in the courthouse was amazing. They were kind and assuring. I felt they really cared about people like us going through the system trying to find salvation from our bad decisions.

May 10, 2020 I am 1,243 days sober

My business has grown. I pay all of my taxes. I have a supportive partner who loves me. We have two dogs, 3 cats and two ferrets. I have built my small business to 7 people working with me. I have rebuilt my entire life.

I truly feel that without the intervention of the Richmond Public Defenders office and the resources of the mental health docket, I wouldn't be where I am now. I wouldn't have a beautiful home and family, wonderful co-workers and staff that guide me daily professionally, or an opportunity to move forward in life and as a person. We are truly blessed to have these services available to us and I am eternally grateful for them.

Please consider contributing to them, because if you do, you'd be changing many lives just like mine, regularly.

Sincerely yours,

Joseph Fessman