



December 9, 2024

Dear Denver City Council Members,

Thank you for this opportunity to respond to the deeply flawed series of articles written by Mr. Ben Markus at Colorado Public Radio (CPR). They paint an inaccurate, unbalanced, and negative impression about Caring for Denver Foundation's (C4D) grantmaking, stewardship of public funds, and positive impact, even in its first few years. CPR also inaccurately and incompletely describes several grassroots community grantees that are led by people of color and those with lived experience and demeans their leadership, programs, integrity, and trustworthiness.

This narrative of casting doubt on the qualifications and expertise of BIPOC people has a long and racist history. Devaluing and demeaning people with lived experience who are using their experience to help others is inexcusable. CPR has done real harm to a lot of good people who don't deserve it, and these articles fail to meet the journalistic standards of fair, accurate, thorough, and objective reporting. This has done a great disservice to the city of Denver, City Council, C4D, the grantees, and the residents of Denver, who now have the mistaken impression that their tax dollars are being misspent.

For over twenty-five years, the Colorado Criminal Justice Reform Coalition (CCJRC) has effectively advocated at the Colorado legislature for sound public safety policy and increased state investment in behavioral health treatment and community-led support services to enhance the well-being and safety of people across Colorado. People with lived experience with the criminal legal system, addiction, homelessness, victimization, and parental incarceration are represented at all levels of our organization. As a nonprofit organization, we also bring decades of experience working with foundations and community partners, especially in the Denver metro area. We have served on multiple grant review panels for C4D, as well as grant review committees for programs administered by multiple state of Colorado departments. Drawing on this extensive background, we offer our perspective.

The flaws in CPR's coverage seem to stem from a fundamental misunderstanding of several key contextual elements, including:

- The depth and complexity of the issues C4D is tackling, including their underlying structural roots. Direct services, while offering significant benefits to individuals, cannot resolve problems that are structural in nature, such as the long-standing inability of the State to resolve the waitlist for providing restoration of competency services despite being under a court-ordered Consent Decree.
- The range of modalities within a continuum of care model, which extends far beyond clinical treatment, encompassing prevention, early intervention, and support for SUD/trauma recovery. This multi-faceted approach requires a diverse range of organizations to deliver both clinical and nonclinical services.
- The multiple pathways to SUD recovery, trauma, and mental wellness, and the value of culturally based approaches provided by people who share their racial/ethnicity/cultural background;

- The different licenses, credentials, and other regulatory oversights that are required (or not) to provide various services;
- C4Ds grant application vetting process;
- The various evaluation methods and metrics, reasonable expectations of timelines to demonstrate outcomes, and the limits of evaluation; and
- The essential role that people with lived experience and BIPOC-led community organizations can play, and the long-standing best practice research that supports both.

Although there are numerous examples in these flawed articles, we will fact-check this one for illustrative purposes as it reflects a dominant theme. “*Millions went to nonprofits run by unlicensed directors, some with long criminal histories*”. People have a right to expect that CPR would know that nonprofit executive directors don’t need to have a license unless they provide clinical services and peer-to-peer engagement is a recognized best practice.

Before addressing the specific issues raised in the articles, CCJRC wants to unequivocally express our strong support and trust in the leadership of Board President Leslie Herod and Executive Director Lorez Meinhold. We have had the privilege of working closely with them for many years, both within and outside the C4D context. We feel very confident in saying that CCJRC is not alone in our support. We also applaud and endorse C4D’s funding philosophy that includes innovation, and providing grants to deep community-based organizations, especially BIPOC and peer-led. Denver will not fully realize the potential impact of C4D by simply funding mental health centers, large nonprofits, and city agencies.

CPR repeatedly mentions that some community organizations declined to talk with the reporter but fails to mention why. As has been shared directly to me by several of these organizations, the reporter was so arrogant, entitled, unnecessarily aggressive, and blatantly accusatory that they declined to engage or continue to engage with him, as is their right. One nonprofit executive director, a woman of color, characterized her experience with him as harassment and stalking. We appreciate that any reporter needs to dig, and sometimes dig hard, but there is a line. This is especially true for a white reporter hounding BIPOC community leaders. It would behoove reporters (and city auditors) to understand that sometimes people don’t want to talk with the media, not because they have something to hide but because they don’t trust that the reporting will be fair and objective. Which, in this case, turned out to be a rightful concern.

CPR also accuses C4D of not having an adequate vetting process in their grantmaking but fails to include a description of the actual vetting process. There are three layers of review by the C4D staff, grant review committees, and the C4D Board of Directors. I have served as a member of a grant review committee for the Alternatives to Jail focus area for several grant cycles. Grant review committees are made up of a diverse group of people with knowledge and relevant experience in the funding focus area from the private, public, and nonprofit sectors, including people with lived experience. Reviewers are required to sign a confidentiality agreement, a practice that CCJRC has also experienced when we’ve served on grant review committees for state grant programs.

In addition to having time to review applications independently, virtual meetings are scheduled with Director Meinhold and a number of the program and evaluation staff where review committee members can have discussions, ask questions of staff, and provide individual feedback on each application and key personnel, including strengths, concerns, and a nonbinding recommendation whether to fund the proposal. These meetings last for several hours. C4D staff then compile and consider that feedback as part of their deliberations before making recommendations to the C4D Board of Directors. This vetting process is robust and incredibly labor-intensive for the staff, and it is a testament to C4D’s commitment to authentic community engagement in their grantmaking.

One of the more inexcusable aspects of CPR's reporting is the smear of ParadigmONE and its Executive Director, Geno Shvedov. The mischaracterization of the Transitional Safety Zone (TSZ) program is so glaring that it could justifiably be called willful ignorance. CPR describes TSZ as a place where *"people in sober living are able to test positive for drugs and remain housed. Residents receive support services, including boxing classes at Shvedov's Aurora gym."* In order to understand the deep value TSZ has added to Denver's recovery ecosystem and the continuity of care model, it is important that you have a more complete description of the TSZ program, which has been certified by the Colorado Association of Recovery Residences (CARR). Since its inception, ParadigmOne has employed a Clinical Director who has state licenses both as a Licensed Addiction Counselor and a Licensed Professional Counselor to manage TSZ, and there are a number of Certified Peer Recovery Support Specialists on staff, including Director Shvedov.

To be accepted into sober living, a person must provide a clean urinalysis. If someone has very recently stopped using drugs, this can take several days or longer. This delay in accessing the program reduces the likelihood that someone will continue to abstain and increases the risk of overdose and homelessness. Similarly, if a person in sober living relapses, they will be removed from the program so as not to jeopardize the sobriety of the other residents. TSZ was designed to fill this gap in both scenarios and can be viewed as a type of "sober living ICU" that provides a safe, 24/7 staff-supervised residence for people beginning or restarting their recovery journey. During intake at TSZ, people are assessed as to whether they need medical detoxification if their substance use history involves alcohol or benzodiazepines. If so, they are referred to a medical provider for that care. Once medical detox is completed or if it isn't needed, people can be accepted into the program even if they can't yet provide a clean urinalysis. Case management, certified peer-recovery specialists, and multiple types of recovery support services are available on-site, and Intensive Outpatient Treatment, provided by licensed clinicians, is arranged and available off-site.

Once stabilized, people transition to a "regular" sober living home, and people can go back and forth between TSZ and "regular" sober living depending on their situation. For many, recovery is not a linear path, and having this programmatic flexibility to toggle people into the right setting ensures they can stay connected to care. Any sober living home can refer a struggling client to TSZ, which not only serves the individual but also helps the larger sober living home ecosystem.

TSZ is an innovation that addresses a long-standing community need, and it is saving lives, as you can read from the attached testimonials from TSZ participants. CCJRC has been so impressed that we have been in discussions at the state level for several months on how to promote expansion of the TSZ model to other parts of the state. But rather than educating the community about this new recovery opportunity, CPR decided to focus more on Director Shvedov's criminal record, including offenses for which he was acquitted, and sow doubt about C4D's decision to award a grant to ParadigmOne. Both choices are shameful.

One of the challenges in the recovery residency field is securing the residences. Nonprofits alone cannot bring to scale the number of homes needed, so they often partner with an LLC or other private entity/investors that are able to access capital to buy the homes. It is complicated and can look messy from the outside. Clear protocols and practices need to be in place to ensure that the lines between the nonprofit and the for-profit are not blurred, but there is nothing illegal about this housing model.

C4D, City Council, and the wider Denver community should share in a collective sense of accomplishment in the role C4D has played in creating this opportunity to develop TSZ but also its role in expanding the number of Certified Peer Recovery Support Specialists and other credentials for people with lived experience, an evidence-based practice promoted by the US Substance Abuse

and Mental Health Administration (SAMHSA). In doing so, it has substantially strengthened and diversified the recovery workforce. Providing grants to academic institutions is not the only way to build the recovery workforce.

Circles of Change is another community organization that CCJRC holds in high regard, with a long track record of providing culturally based services to youth of color. CPR calls their legitimacy and integrity into question because the referral partnerships ended up being different than what was described in their C4D proposal, which is much ado about nothing. It is not uncommon that details in proposals, like referral partnerships, change for several legitimate reasons. The methods of referral are significantly less important than the actual delivery of services. But even more puzzling was the mention that the Executive Director's salary had increased between 2018 and 2022 with no context provided, yet a clear innuendo that it was improper. Executive Director Angell Perez has a master's degree, over thirty years of experience, and has served as Executive Director for Circles of Change for 13 years. For most of those years she was substantially underpaid, as is common for staff of smaller nonprofits who, all too often, are willing to sacrifice and work for sub-living wages to serve their community. CCJRC applauds the Circles of Change Board of Directors, who initiated and approved this increase in salary because Angell's leadership, commitment, and ability to connect with young people is a blessing and deserves adequate compensation.

CPR also questions the rationale of C4D in approving a multi-year grant in 2021 to Heavy Hands Heavy Hearts (HHHH), relying on a quote from former US Attorney Bob Troyer that "no one knows what works" to reduce youth violence. Mr. Troyer may not know what works, but there are Community Violence Interruption (CVI) programs, like Cure Violence, that are research-based and have demonstrated [impact](#). The fact that HHHH's former director didn't have a state license in mental or behavioral health is irrelevant because he wasn't providing clinical services to the youth. This demonstrates, again, that CPR does not understand that improving mental health outcomes also involves the delivery of non-clinical services, especially to reach youth and people of color for whom traditional mental health centers have failed to serve.

CCJRC gave our annual award last year to a collective of several community organizations, including HHHH, for their years and years of youth violence interruption work. For CPR to now challenge the decision-making of a grant made prior to the dual tragedy of the murder of the former director's son in 2023 and the charges that are pending against him now is weaponized sensationalism.

Like other foundations and public agencies, C4D must be good stewards of resources and expectations of grantees individually, and their potential collective impact must be reasonable, clear, and within realistic timelines. In its first three years of grantmaking, during a pandemic, C4D is not going to dramatically reduce overdose, addiction, or crime, although these are metrics referenced by CPR. It is also not legitimate for CPR to compare the voter initiative passed in Larimer County and the decline in the suicide rate without providing the context as to whether those two variables are concurrent, correlative, or causal.

The Colorado Department of Regulatory Agencies now conducts many of their sunset reviews on grant programs after five years, not three years, because it learned that a three-year lookback was too premature to reliably assess impact and make a recommendation to the Colorado General Assembly regarding reauthorization. That's not to say that other metrics like the number of clients served, type and dosage of services provided, an increase in protective factors, and direct feedback through client surveys, or other evaluation methods can't be done on an early and ongoing basis.

We acknowledge freely that grantees can underperform, make mistakes in paperwork, or try something that doesn't work. This is true for both larger established and smaller grassroots community organizations, mental health centers, and city agency grantees. Effective and impactful grantmaking involves many components: awareness and accessibility to the funding opportunity, diligent vetting of proposals, equitable grant decision-making, ongoing monitoring post-award, technical assistance to grantees, grantee reporting requirements, and meaningful data collection and evaluation. All of these are included in C4D operations.

If the City Council or the C4D Board wants to strengthen in any of those areas, I believe it would be necessary to revisit the 5% cap on the amount of revenue that can be spent on administrative expenses to build that capacity. There are lessons to be learned, and we would be happy to participate in those discussions or offer any other assistance.

Thank you for the grace of your time. As a Denver resident and voter, I am deeply grateful to the incredible C4D staff, the grantees, and all the other caring and supportive hands involved in this monumental lift.

In solidarity,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Christie Donner". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Christie Donner  
Executive Director

# In our own words:

**Participants & staff of Hazelbrook's Transitional Safety Zone program funded through Caring For Denver Foundation respond to CPR's 'Caring For Cash' series.**

Hazelbrook was, and continues to be a ground zero reference point almost daily. Not only did I learn how addiction works and how to improve myself personally to overcome it, I also learned how to be a more effective listener, more attentive, have grace, as well as step outside of myself to see a 360 view of addiction as a disease. Because all of the staff involved in this program were former addicts, they understand what you're going through. Hazelbrook will be forever imprinted on who I am because of how amazing the program is built and executed for addicts that are struggling. **I still to this day, an entire year after I graduated from the program, have counselors still very much invested and supportive of my journey. I have an entire group of people who genuinely care about me enough to check in on me.** That in itself is helping my walk with addiction and sobriety because it shifts your mindset when you know that you are not alone and you are actually cared about.

- Barbara Taylor [btaylor103para@gmail.com](mailto:btaylor103para@gmail.com)

TSZ not only provided a safe place where I could get back on track. But also saved my daughter's life. **I feel like with this program I will definitely be successful in my life.**

- Miss Reynolds [mkr.10122022@gmail.com](mailto:mkr.10122022@gmail.com)

My addiction began the year of 2014. Soon after I started using my entire life was turned upside down. I was in and out of jail, homeless, institutionalized several different times, in treatment centers, and almost dead, and I still continued to heroin up until I was introduced to fentanyl. At that point I had no control. Nothing I did to try to get better would work for me. I was sick most of the time, and in order to get better, I had to sell my body for drugs. Doing so made me feel disgusting. I thought my worth decreased every second and I couldn't find a way out. **TSZ opened their arms to me and helped me get clean, being that they are the only place in Denver or anywhere else that take you at your worst and fight with u to get u at your best. It's remarkable!** I am now 1 year clean and in a sober living. I went from not having my kids at all to FINALLY having my 5yo son three nights a week. I get to do mommy things and take him to school, read books with him, do school work with him, and so much more. I am working on building a relationship with my 14yo daughter and rekindling that. I am so happy with where my life is going and excited to see where I will end up! I work doing what I love and take so much pride in the woman I have fought so hard to become.

- Courtney McKneil [oday303@gmail.com](mailto:oday303@gmail.com)

There was a time when my days were consumed by getting high in a van, aimlessly drifting through life without any purpose or direction. I felt lost and stuck, trapped in a cycle I couldn't break. But a little over a year ago, I found hope through Hazelbrook, and it changed everything. Today, I'm sober and working with women in early recovery, helping them see that there is a different way forward. I get to guide them through their own journey, showing them the many pathways to healing and strength that I was once blind to. **Hazelbrook gave me the tools and the support to transform my life, and now, I'm honored to be able to pass that hope on to others.** Recovery is possible, and together, we can rebuild.

- Mikayla T. Santana, grateful TSZ Night Manager [santanamikayla1@gmail.com](mailto:santanamikayla1@gmail.com)

**In Our Own Words: Participants & staff of Hazelbrook's Transitional Safety Zone program funded through Caring For Denver Foundation respond to CPR's 'Caring For Cash' series.**

I am no longer sleeping on the side of the road trying to keep warm in a cardboard box. **I am able to stay clean, work on my recovery, and feel like a valued human being. I feel like I am somewhere I belong and am wanted.**

- Casandra Sari Arari

Hazelbrook TSZ has helped save THOUSANDS of lives. The C4D grant has helped TSZ give people safe housing, connect with professionals, and stabilize. **The funding makes it possible to spend quality hours with people in early recovery, out of homelessness and mental health crises. They are given the tools to live again, dream again, identify their needs and get them met, reconcile with children and family, and discover their value and worth.** The peer model is extremely successful. Our past doesn't define us. Without Geno's vision and courage to open up the TSZ program, and without the Caring 4 Denver funding, hundreds of lives may not have been saved. Miracles happen every single day at Hazelbrook and the TSZ program. Lives are transformed, hope is restored, faith is restored, and families are becoming restored. We are all life-changers on the front lines of this deadly epidemic.

- Alison Turner TSZ Case Manager

Throughout my addiction I've been what you would call a "functioning addict" until I found myself homeless on the street of Denver. Through drug court **I was placed in Hazelbrook's TSZ program. Honestly, I didn't have high expectations at all. When I entered this community, I was overwhelmed by the amount and extent of support they provide for the residents. It's incredible.** Hazelbrook saved my life and provided the opportunity to find stability and reclaim my life for myself and my family.

- Daryl Lepp TSZ Case Manager

The TSZ House at Hazelbrook saved me. It not only helped me get sober but also gave me guidance and tools to stay sober. **Because of TSZ and the sober living house, I am 825 days sober, back home with my 3 amazing children, where I belong.** I got off probation a year early, and I have rebuilt relationships with family and gained trust back. I am also working full-time as a manager at an automotive shop. I am forever grateful for the program."

- Tay [taytay31628@gmail.com](mailto:taytay31628@gmail.com)

I've struggled with substance abuse since the age of 13. **By the age of 12, I was in the system, and my life became a revolving door of jails, prisons, and parole. I accumulated 11 felony convictions and spent more than 11 years behind bars. When I came to Hazelbrook, I was homeless, broken, and alone. I didn't even think I could qualify for a sober living house because I couldn't stay clean long enough to pass a urine analysis. But TSZ changed everything for me.** The staff didn't judge me. They met me where I was, accepted me, and treated me with dignity when I felt like I had none. In the TSZ, I witnessed something that would transform me: people just like me, who had faced addiction, incarceration, and homelessness—living meaningful lives in recovery. Their stories gave me hope. Their smiles inspired me. And for the first time, I began to believe that there could be a better version of myself. I wanted what they had.

**Hazelbrook is powerfully effective because it is peer-led. The leadership and staff understand what it's like to be in the trenches of addiction and incarceration. They bring lived experience to the table—not just as individuals in recovery but also as examples of what's possible.** They offered me the resources, advocacy, and accountability I needed to succeed, but more importantly, they showed me compassion and gave me a sense of belonging. Over time, I began to rebuild my self-esteem and confidence. I found a purpose. Through Hazelbrook, I was given the opportunity to become a house manager. It was in this role that I discovered my passion for helping others. I learned that service is a cornerstone of my recovery. From there, I became certified as a Peer Recovery Coach, then a Housing Supervisor, and today I work in Hazelbrook's admissions department as an Intake Coordinator. I am grateful as well as proud of the fact that our entire admissions team are former residents of Hazelbrook Sober Living and individuals finding freedom and success in recovery. The suffering from our past gives us the compassion and the wisdom to help others at the beginning of their own journey.

- Kyle Warner TSZ Intake Coordinator

Hazelbrook has done great things for so many people and it means a lot to me. **I was an addict for 21 years and went through 4 different rehabs, and this has worked.**

- Stephanie [ddavidson468@gmail.com](mailto:ddavidson468@gmail.com)

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TSZ saved my life. Bottom line. It was a game changer. Chronic homelessness and decades of active addiction had me bound, lock and key. **After several attempts to get into sober living I had given up. I could not get clean long enough to meet the requirements to be allowed in most all sober living programs. The TSZ program was really my last hope.** After learning that the TSZ program would allow me to detox and progress through the program as long as I stayed clean and sober gave me the hope that I could address my addiction and be successful. Two and a half years later I have maintained my sobriety and rebuilt my life. I'm forever grateful.

- Leonard Chacon [lchacon@coloradocoalition.org](mailto:lchacon@coloradocoalition.org)

I am 23 years old. Before starting the Hazelbrook ACP Program I spent a total of 18 days in the Hazelbrook TSZ program. I can truly say that HazelBrook has saved my life. I've been to many different programs throughout Colorado and none of them have had such an impact on me like HazelBrook has. My life has changed for the better. Hazelbrook will never be left out of my story. I am proud to be a client, and I hope that HazelBrook continues to help other men and women who are struggling with addiction like they helped me.

- Seantiara May

Before TSZ, I was living in an RV, completely isolated from the world. I was consumed by shame and unhappiness, spiraling into depression. My boyfriend was abusive, constantly yelling and hitting me. I walked on eggshells every day because nothing I did was good enough. In the chaos of that life, I turned to using even more. I felt like I had completely lost myself. One day, I hit my breaking point. I called to set up an intake at TSZ. It was terrifying to make that decision, but I knew I had no choice. **Three days later, after jumping out of a truck to escape, I made my way to TSZ. Thanks to Hazelbrook TSZ and all the incredible women who opened that door for me and kept reaching out until I finally walked through. You saved my life. I was trapped in the darkness of addiction and the hands of an abusive boyfriend, and I knew I wouldn't survive if I didn't make a change.** Today, because of TSZ, I am alive, healing, and building a future worth fighting for. Thank you for giving me the chance to find myself again.

- Tiffany Terry [tterry0318@gmail.com](mailto:tterry0318@gmail.com)

I am a 52yo black female with a record. I wouldn't have had a felony record if Hazelbrook had been in existence. Due to my addiction, I have been incarcerated too many times to count and have had to restart my life with no support or resources. Hazelbrook has changed that for me and the peers I have the pleasure of meeting daily through the TSZ program. **I have been to four in-house rehabs only to relapse each time because they only address addiction, not life skills and therapy, work programs, housing, clothing, and a supportive environment.** Before you embark on a smear campaign, please know the facts from the people whose lives have been impacted for the positive.

- Keisha Croft [keishacroft773@gmail.com](mailto:keishacroft773@gmail.com)

Hazelbrook has been the most positive change in my life and given me hope I had lost within my addiction. Doors that I believed would forever be locked and chained have opened because of the exceptional individuals and community that have built this amazing TSZ program. **I finally have a future again. It's truly a comfort to have not only people who chose to care about addicts like me who have lived so low for so long but also who understand what it's like because we've all had our own version of hell on earth. I don't know of a better program,** and it's a shame to whoever can't recognize all the amazing things one can achieve or the exceptional support from all the warriors that are a part of Hazelbrook. From the founders to the managers to the residents, all have made a positive impact and strengthened me in each step in my journey.

- A TSZ graduate

The TSZ program is amazing. The dynamics of the program have truly helped with my sobriety and for my future of staying sober. **It has changed my life for the better.**

- Lyric current TSZ participant



## In Our Own Words: Participants & staff of Hazelbrook's Transitional Safety Zone program funded through Caring For Denver Foundation respond to CPR's 'Caring For Cash' series.

In March 2023 I relocated from California to Colorado, driven by the desire to be closer to my children, who had been residing there with their grandmother for about two years while I was battling active addiction. When I arrived, I was overwhelmed and uncertain about my next steps. I had no clear direction or understanding of my surroundings. Hazelbrook welcomed me into their TSZ program the very same day I applied, for which I was deeply grateful. From the moment I joined Hazelbrook, I experienced an atmosphere of acceptance and support. The staff extended unconditional kindness and encouragement, helping me rediscover how to love myself and others. **I spent a transformative year at Hazelbrook, where I took on the role of house manager. This position allowed me to leave a meaningful impact on others, guiding them toward positive change. I regained full custody of my children, thanks in large part to the unwavering support of an incredible peer coach at Hazelbrook who advocated for me throughout the process.** Eventually, I advanced to the position of primary peer coach, working alongside an inspiring group of women. I had the privilege of witnessing their incredible progress as they transitioned to independent living, secured employment, obtained driver's licenses, and even purchased cars—milestones that once seemed unattainable during the throes of addiction. I am where I am today because of Hazelbrook—almost 2 years clean!

- Kayla Marie

Recovery is hard; regret is harder. I have been struggling with addiction for about 10 years now. I lost someone I love dearly to an overdose & the story could have been very much the same for me if not for TSZ and Hazelbrook Sober Living Homes. **I had relapsed after a year & a half of sobriety & was feeling shameful about having to start my journey over. However, the TSZ staff welcomed me with open arms & it honestly felt like I was returning home.** They helped me physically & emotionally through detox while also covering expenses for all that brings. Lived experience might be something some people look down on, but it is such an empowering thing to see someone who has been through it & made it to the other side & is helping so many others. Hazelbrook has opened so many doors for me & not only given me tools to succeed with long-term sobriety but a community that has literally changed my life & is giving me a life back, my family their daughter/sister/aunty back. I STAND WITH HAZELBROOK.

- Heidi Schmittel

Hazelbrook Sober Living houses have saved my daughter's life. **The degree of understanding of what is needed to help one be successful to live a life of sobriety from someone who has lived the experience is much better than just someone who is book-trained. I have seen that firsthand with my daughter.** The programs and resources that Hazelbrook has given my daughter are priceless. Not only to her but to all of her family. She finally feels like she is in a place to be successful. A place with love and acceptance and not rejection that so many people in society pass out to her. A place where people understand the struggle, unlike those of us who haven't lived the experience. Please, this mamma is begging you don't turn your back on these wonderful individuals who are living in these homes. They need them.

- DeeAnne Sierra Mother of a TSZ participant

Hazelbrook not only saved my life but gave me the tools and resources to help others struggling with addiction. They gave me the hope I needed for myself. I have multiple mentors that teach me and guide me every day in Hazelbrook. **The level of support that exists amongst the people in Hazelbrook is like nothing I've ever experienced. And it's because we are all cut from the same cloth. Every member of staff knows what it's like to be in the throes of addiction and what it takes to overcome it.** Geno is one of the men I look up to the most. Because he has a checkered past, but instead of letting that bring him down he lifts himself and others up to a better future.

- Cody Finn

It doesn't take a genius to look around and see that there is an epidemic going on with drug addiction and homelessness. I'm a firm believer that there's not one family or person that addiction hasn't touched in some fashion. Whether that's a mother who got hooked on pills or an uncle who can't stop drinking or maybe a child that fell into the wrong circle of friends. **I have been able to witness the ethical guidelines Hazelbrook operates under and the thousands of people it has provided services and hope to. Due to places and organizations like Hazelbrook, families are getting their loved ones back.**

- Dylan Crane

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I came to Hazelbrook Sober Living as one of the very first residents at the first Hazelbrook Women's home. At that time, I was utterly broken. I was battling addiction to methamphetamine for nearly 20 years. My doctors gave me just six months to live unless I made a drastic change. I had lost the trust of my family and friends and burned more bridges than I care to remember. **Hazelbrook provided the foundation I desperately needed to turn my life around. The structured environment, combined with unwavering support, gave me the tools to embrace a life in recovery. I began to believe in myself. Hazelbrook made me feel worthy—not just of recovery but of an incredible future. It provided a safe space to work through my struggles and fostered my growth into a person capable of giving back.** With support from Hazelbrook I have gained new skills and have been empowered to teach others how to live a new way—sharing hope through my lived experience. Today, I am proud to say I am 7 ½ years clean.

- Kimberly Meager

Having 30 years of personal experience with addiction and recovery across multiple jurisdictions in multiple states I can say that I have never come across another program like TSZ. **Nowhere else have I seen any program go to the lengths that TSZ goes to get clients in from the cold and off the streets with lifesaving MAT services. I saw women crawl off the street, broken spirits, and got to be a support person as they found their strength and will to live again.** I saw the light come on in their eyes. TSZ is something that should be supported and expanded and refined so that it can be shared across the country. Denver is blessed to have a program like TSZ.

- Deanna Bard, former TSZ House Manager [right.thru.you5150@gmail.com](mailto:right.thru.you5150@gmail.com)

Last year, I was at rock bottom. I had a broken relationship with my 20yo son, and my 12yo daughter was losing faith in me as well. My addiction had officially conquered my life—I caught 3 felonies within 18 months. I was at my wit's end and even contemplated suicide. My daughter told me she felt "she wasn't a priority in my life anymore." Hearing those words hit me hard! Right then and there, I decided to reach out for help. I googled Sober Living in Denver and the first one that popped up was Hazelbrook, I filled out the five minute application and within an hour I got a phone call from a representative of Hazelbrook. He asked me a few questions and told me that the TSZ program would be the most appropriate first step toward my sobriety. Within 30 minutes a staff member from Hazelbrook came to pick me up and took me to TSZ women's house in Aurora. That was truly one of the best days of my life. Every single person in the TSZ program has been absolutely amazing. **From the moment I got there, I was treated with care and concern, and never once felt like I was being judged or scrutinized because the people who were there coaching me were all recovering addicts themselves. Some had been through the criminal justice system, had been in my shoes, and had once lived a life that I lived. Receiving peer coaching from other recovering addicts who emphasized empathy and understanding fostered trust and allowed me to deeply connect with them. It also increased my participation in groups because I felt more comfortable talking about my vulnerable life experiences knowing others faced similar challenges. Hearing their stories, seeing how happy and successful they are in their lives now in recovery, and helping others in their journey to sobriety are not only motivating but also incredibly inspiring.** I graduated from the TSZ program, went on to live in the Hazelbrook Arvada House, and have remained sober ever since. I can always reach out to anyone in the Hazelbrook community, they are always there for support and always rooting for me. Today I can proudly say I have 507 days sober, all thanks to the TSZ program and Hazelbrook for putting in the time, love, energy and support into saving my life. I will be forever grateful for this amazing program.

- April Prado [aprilprado38@gmail.com](mailto:aprilprado38@gmail.com)

I wanted to share how amazing the TSZ program has been. **It's given me the tools and support I needed to make some serious changes in my life, and I'm so much better off because of it.** I know it's made a difference for so many other people too. Let the haters keep hating, and the rest of us will keep on shining through.

- Domini J. Lewis [yikkibanks.com@gmail.com](mailto:yikkibanks.com@gmail.com)

**In Our Own Words: Participants & staff of Hazelbrook's Transitional Safety Zone program funded through Caring For Denver Foundation respond to CPR's 'Caring For Cash' series.**

**The TSZ program and Hazelbrook Sober Living gave me the support system I needed to completely turn my life around and be the successful man that my parents raised me to be.** Hazelbrook not only saved my life but gave me the opportunity to help others who are struggling with drug and alcohol addiction. I am now 2 years, 3 months, and 7 days sober, and my family is proud of who I have become.

- Jacob Fica

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I got out of jail and had nowhere to go—my family had fallen apart, my boy was taken from me and I had lost all hope. If it weren't for Hazelbrook and Geno and all of the staff, I'd be dead. Geno is an incredible human being who cares about the houses and residents. I've been through so much therapy and rehabs and this program has turned everything around for me. I now work as a house manager in the Springs. **This program and the staff and residents around me who have become part of my family have given me back everything. I have my son back, and he adores me and he knows he can depend on me.** I'm not homeless and I just finished all my course work as a peer recovery coach and am now working to be state-certified so I can help others who are struggling and show them that Hazelbrook works, I'm living proof!

- Ryan Olnowich

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Hazelbrook TSZ and peer coaching services saved me in multiple ways. Not only in staying sober, but in finding purpose. **I am honored to be one of the former addicts and criminals working in the recovery field. Anyone in addiction deserves a chance to turn things around and be successful regardless of the stigma in place.**

- Jessy Stuebs TSZ Case Manager

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First and foremost, I'd like to express the immense amount of gratitude and appreciation I have for Geno and Hazelbrook as a whole. I've accomplished more in the last two years than my entire life. **I wouldn't be where I'm at today in my recovery without Geno's help. Hazelbrook believes in me and has provided me with the foundation I need to build my recovery on top of.**

This is a struggle that will carry on until the very last moments of my life, but it is a beautiful one.

I've never been a part of anything like this, and I am truly grateful that Hazelbrook helped me find my place in this world. That gives me hope.

- Pete Estrada

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I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to have heard about the TSZ program. I am excited about being a part of this amazing program that's changed my life and changed the path of destruction I was headed down. It's amazing.

- Mariah Ann Fernandez

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November 21, 2021 I walked into prison, marking the beginning of a journey that would ultimately lead me to sobriety. Before prison I was homeless, on meth, sleeping behind a dumpster. Upon my release, the temptation to fall back into old habits was strong, but I knew I had to make a change. I sat in the parole office with nothing but some prison blue jeans on and a number across my shirt wondering what I was going to do next. That's when I made a call that changed everything. I called Hazelbrook Sober Living.

From day one, their team provided me with the resources and support I needed to start rebuilding my life. They gave me a safe and supportive environment to heal and grow. They made me feel welcomed and encouraged me. As I progressed, I became a house manager and helped others who were struggling with addiction. I saw firsthand Hazelbrook's impact on people's lives. This organization literally saved my life and I've seen so many other lives be saved. I AM NOT THE ONLY SUCCESS STORY to come from Hazelbrook. There are many, and all of us are changing the community around us today.

With a lot of training I was able to become a Peer Recovery Coach. I was nervous about that as well, but **with encouragement I now have a purpose, something that is bigger than myself to wake up to everyday. Hazelbrook allowed me to change the stigma of addicts and no longer feel ashamed or isolated anymore. Today, I'm proud to say that I'm sober, enrolled in college, and living a fulfilling life.** I owe a huge debt of gratitude to Hazelbrook and their team for believing in me and giving me the tools I and so many others needed to succeed. I'm living proof that with the right support and resources, anyone can overcome addiction and achieve their goals. I'm grateful for a second chance at life, and I'm committed to making the most of it.

- Duane Michael

**In Our Own Words: Participants & staff of Hazelbrook's Transitional Safety Zone program funded through Caring For Denver Foundation respond to CPR's 'Caring For Cash' series.**

Growing up, I witnessed the devastating grip of addiction tearing through my family, and for 30 years, I lived with what felt like a life sentence. Moving to Colorado from Texas was supposed to be a fresh start, but I quickly found myself stranded. I called every program I could find, with no luck, until I was told to call Hazelbrook. They didn't just hear my desperation, they responded with compassion and a genuine desire to help. What I found in the TSZ program was something I hadn't experienced before: a safe, sober, and supportive community. This environment began to chip away at my resistance. I saw what my life could be, and for the first time, I WANTED recovery. The leaders at Hazelbrook taught me that my lived experience wasn't a burden, it was a strength. Their belief in me inspired me to help others in the same way they helped me. **Through my journey with Hazelbrook, I've been able to grow in ways I never thought possible.**

- **As a House Manager, I saw how transformative peer support can be.**
- **As a Recovery Coach, I learned the power of meeting people where they are, with empathy and understanding.**
- **As a member of the Housing Team, I discovered the critical role accountability plays in recovery.**
- **As a Program Director, I understand the profound importance of integrity, community, and shared purpose.**

Today, I am proud to say that the same organization that saved my life has given me the tools to help save others. My story isn't just about overcoming addiction, it's about transformation, resilience, and the power of community. Together, we work toward the same goal, to save and change lives.

- **Christina Sisemore** Hazelbrook Program Director

Deep in the depths of my addiction, I felt there was no escape from the cycle of destruction I had created. I had lost all of my friends and found myself in serious legal trouble. The weight of my actions and the consequences overwhelmed me. Multiple suicide attempts seemed like the only way out, as I saw no hope for a better future. I lived in constant fear, never knowing if I would make it out alive or end up dead. Running and chasing after my next high left me exhausted and drained. **Three years of this lifestyle had taken a toll on me, and I knew I needed a change. That's when I found TSZ through Hazelbrook. I arrived with serious criminal charges hanging over my head, uncertain of what my future held. With the support of TSZ, I am now involved with my family and am a House Manager through Hazelbrook.** I have a strong support system, and I know I wouldn't have been able to turn my life around without TSZ. My freedom and my new life are the direct result of finally surrendering and saying, "Enough is enough." TSZ played an integral role in my journey to recovery, and I am forever grateful.

- **Kyää Perez**

After struggling with addiction for years and trying numerous detoxes, rehabs, and outpatient programs, I finally found lasting recovery at Hazelbrook. As someone working in recovery, I can attest that addicts understand each other's struggles. With hard work, determination, and a strong community, recovery is possible. Geno has created a supportive, loving environment where individuals can rebuild their lives. Hazelbrook has become a family for many of us, offering hope and connection when it seemed lost. In the face of the opioid crisis, Hazelbrook's commitment to sobriety, through drug testing and a variety of programs, ensures its residents are supported every step of the way. **Thanks to Hazelbrook, I now have a career, a home, and a strong support system. I have my life back, and my family has their daughter and sister again. Hazelbrook's impact is immeasurable.** I stand by Hazelbrook because it gave me a second chance at life, and I know recovery is possible for all of us.

- **Carolina Romagnoli**

I wanted to share how amazing the TSZ program has been. **It's given me the tools and support I needed to make some serious changes in my life, and I'm so much better off because of it.** I know it's made a difference for so many other people too. Let the haters keep hating, and the rest of us will keep on shining through.

- **Domini J. Lewis** [vikkibanks.com@gmail.com](mailto:vikkibanks.com@gmail.com)

**In Our Own Words: Participants & staff of Hazelbrook's Transitional Safety Zone program funded through Caring For Denver Foundation respond to CPR's 'Caring For Cash' series.**

I am sharing a profound transformation through the 6-year sobriety journey at Hazelbrook Sober Living. I stand proud as a living testament to the power of this remarkable program. Through Hazelbrook's comprehensive support system I have not only achieved sobriety but have found purpose in helping others on their recovery journeys. I now serve as housing manager for the TSZ program and work as a primary peer coach on the Hazelbrook side, giving me the opportunity to give back to the community that has helped save my life. **Geno and Jess Shevdov's dedication and vision have created ripple effects throughout our entire community. Their commitment to recovery has touched countless lives, including my own. Through their leadership, thousands have found their pathway and a renewed sense of purpose.** The success stories emerging from Hazelbrook are numerous and real. This inspiring organization has helped transform lives by not just supporting recovery but providing practical opportunities for growth through employment and housing assistance. We've watched people rebuild their lives from the ground up, reconnecting with their families and becoming productive members of society.

- Rick Childs TSZ House Manager

Hazelbrook has saved my life after years of drug addiction and criminal history. I had no idea there was a community of people who were recovering from addiction and homelessness. I need to comment about what Hazelbrook is and all the good it is doing to reduce death, homelessness and also affording people coming out of the judicial system a chance to improve their lives. **Hazelbrook is not only a sober living program in the community, it is an entire community of people whose primary focus is to help other people out of the darkness which we all used to once think there was no way out of.** By providing a safe environment for people to stay and seek employment it has become a platform that has helped thousands and thousands of people to get off of the streets and to work through their issues of drug addiction. In addition to that Hazelbrook provide a platform hundreds of individuals have found meaningful and purpose driven lives, helping others to recover.

- Thomas O'Neal

Since the age of 15, I had been in active addiction. I would lie, steal, and hurt those closest to me. I took from my community, and most painfully, from myself. My life was spiraling out of control—drugged out, defeated, and depressed. My family saw me as just another person doomed to continue the cycle of addiction, like many in my family before me who never made it out—those who ended up dead or in jail, never getting a chance to turn things around. I'd had moments of hope in the past. I got clean, got a job—but I didn't work on myself. It was just a brief flicker of light before I fell right back into addiction. I became absent from my child's life, unable to be the father she deserved. I overdosed a couple of times, and still, nothing stopped me.

**Then a friend set me up with the TSZ program. There, I met people who would become some of the most important people in my life—my best friend, mentors, and people who believed in me when I couldn't believe in myself. I learned more about myself in just two weeks in that program than I had in my entire life.** From TSZ, I moved on to Hazelbrook, where I've accomplished things that once seemed impossible. I have my child back in my life. I had been driving illegally with a suspended license for most of my life. In just two months at Hazelbrook, I got everything squared away—my license, interlock, insurance, and even two cars. I've been a burden on my family for years. After a year at Hazelbrook, I have my own place, and a career that I can feel good about at the end of every day.

The people I've met at Hazelbrook are some of the most amazing people I will ever know. My story isn't unique—this could be anyone's story. But I thank God every day for bringing Hazelbrook into my life. Without Caring for Denver and TSZ, none of this would have been possible. Thank you, Geno, for your vision. I'm not lost anymore, I'm on the path to the life I always wanted. And I'm going to keep going.

- Trevor Maldonado

**TSZ really helped me get my life back and made me believe in myself again!** I was a very lost troubled individual, coming to the TSZ made my road to recovery much easier especially with the team of staff they have there. Everyone is very understanding and supportive I couldn't have done it on my own I'm forever grateful for the TSZ program!!

- Salena Compos

**In Our Own Words: Participants & staff of Hazelbrook's Transitional Safety Zone program funded through Caring For Denver Foundation respond to CPR's 'Caring For Cash' series.**

I am a 26 year old recovering alcoholic/addict, and this is my story. From birth basically, my life was controlled by alcohol, drug use, and crime. My birth mother was an addict who was in and out of jail and prison and my father was a Mexican immigrant who was also in and out of the legal system until he was deported when I was still very young. I spent my early childhood with foster families until I was 6 when I got adopted by an incredible family who showed me a type of love I had never experienced. There were probably 4 or 5 good years with good memories before I started to act out, lie, and get in trouble. I started drinking when I was 12 years old. I was caught stealing cars from my family members, stealing alcohol, sneaking out, getting in fights, and even accusing my parents of some pretty awful things that honestly were not true because I wanted everyone to feel bad for me so I would get in less trouble. I went in and out of juvenile detention centers. By 15 I was a full blown alcoholic and was also addicted to prescription medication, and then at 16 I was introduced to what I thought was cocaine but was actually methamphetamine. I would use off and on throughout the next few years, along with many other substances. And started to rack up more incidents with police.

After I graduated, I met a woman who would in a short time be the mother of my child. Then COVID happened and she left to be with another man. My drinking had already spiraled to the point of me where I could not function without having alcohol in my system. This is when my drug use got worse. Even after not being able to see my daughter and losing that relationship, jobs, my home, friends, and family. I still decided to use drugs. I just couldn't stop. It had taken complete hold of my life at this point. I was honestly pretty close to facing prison time if I kept it up, or even death. On August 18th, 2021, I decided enough was enough and put down the drugs for good. I spent many months in rehab just trying to figure out what I was going to do next. And then I found Hazelbrook. This is when my life changed from having absolutely zero hope and wanting to die to feeling alive for the first time ever without the use of drugs.

**My time at Hazelbrook was not always perfect though, as I did have a slip and held myself about 8 months into the program and had to go to what is called TSZ. I was welcomed with open arms and was told I was loved. I was given a second chance. I was set on giving up on myself and going back to my old ways of life until it finally took my life or I ended up in prison but TSZ, the staff members, and the people I went through TSZ with, honestly saved my life.** And I get to call many of those people my friends today. My life today is something I would have never imagined and that's because of this program and the people in the program. I have learned what it means to be a leader, to be honest and to take accountability for my actions, to care about/help others, and how to give second chances to people who, by society, are labeled bad, unworthy and thrown to the curb just to continue the horrible cycle of addiction. Most importantly it taught me how to be proud of myself and never to give up, because I am worthy of a better life. I currently work for Hazelbrook as a Peer Coach and Admin Team Member and have seen so many lives changed by this program. Hazelbrook TSZ not only saved my life but continues to save lives every single day.

**- Conner Voght**

**The TSZ program has been the critical part of recovery I had always been missing. It's an opportunity to build the strongest possible foundation to living life in recovery.** From the moment I walked in the doors, I was immediately greeted by my case manager, who asked me what I needed to be successful. Simple things like helping me get my ID, to going to court with me to clear my name of outstanding warrants. I'd been homeless, strung out, starving, wanted by the law, unemployed, depressed, lost, and really only cared about staying well. **When I left the Hazelbrook TSZ program, I was happy, healthy, motivated, and employed, and I had successfully completed the 26 hours of relapse prevention which I reflect on and utilize every single day.** Now, today I am still sober and living my life the best I've ever been! I pray that those still in need of the help I've received get the chance to save themselves because, without TSZ, I'd be dead.

**- Brittany Royal**

I am so grateful for the fundamentals behind the TSZ program. I just completed 60 days inpatient, and thought I was going to sober living. **I am so glad I was put here instead. Creating a stable foundation for recovery are the building blocks I did not have. Without TSZ, I truly believe I wouldn't have been successful at all!**

**- Mandy S.**

## In Our Own Words: Participants & staff of Hazelbrook's Transitional Safety Zone program funded through Caring For Denver Foundation respond to CPR's 'Caring For Cash' series.

TSZ saved my life. Before TSZ, I was trying to die. I was doing everything I could to die. I then entered TSZ and learned to begin loving myself and life again. I completed TSZ successfully and then moved into one of the Hazelbrook houses and continued my journey to become successful and stay sober. **I owe my new life to TSZ and all the staff who helped me get through the hardest, roughest transitions of my life. Without the staff or the program, I would be dead.** Without the amazing Wellness Wednesday or the relapse prevention group, I wouldn't have made it through. I wouldn't have wanted this new life. I am very grateful for the opportunity to have gone through TSZ.

- Brittney Orr

I don't even know if I can put this into words how big of an impact TSZ has made on my life and recovery. TSZ has literally saved and changed my life! Finally, after 15 long years of being an active addict, I decided for the first time in my life that I wanted to get clean and stay sober. **On October 13, 2024, I walked in the doors of TSZ, and the amount of sincere love, support, and encouragement I received from the staff and my peers is more than I ever thought possible. I instantly started to love myself and see the beauty in life instead of struggling and barely surviving each day.** I have made lifelong friendships through the TSZ community and they've left a huge footprint on my heart.

- Mishale Scott

I was blessed with going through the Hazelbrook TSZ program. Before I got to TSZ, I was addicted, broken, lost, and hopeless. Upon arrival at the Phase 1 house, I felt that I may finally have a REAL chance at a better life. I had everything I needed - safety, community, food, and a clean bed to sleep in. I was able to start rebuilding my life. I attended Relapse Prevention with Pam Clifton, where she helped me discover myself and how I got to where I had been in my addiction. Those groups are where my healing began. I could go on and on singing praises about how grateful I am for the TSZ program, and for Pam's wisdom and love, but my life today is evidence of the fact that the program works; it MORE than works. **I can say without the shadow of a doubt that I wouldn't be here if I hadn't found TSZ. I am now one year and one month clean and sober.**

After everything I learned in TSZ, I spent eight months as a resident house manager for Hazelbrook Sober Living until I was ready to move out, and now I'm living a life I could have only dreamt of before Hazelbrook TSZ. I am forever grateful for the people in the program who helped me get this far. My life is barely beginning. I'm so grateful. Thank you so much!

- Brianna Uribe

Back in 2022, my divorce put me in a downward spiral. I ended up walking away from my 2 children. I couldn't take care of myself, let alone care for these two innocent little people. I ended up selling drugs. I tried to overdose, hoping I would never wake up. I was living on the street, learning the true meaning of being in survival mode. I was arrested by Lakewood police for a felony distribution charge and allowed the opportunity to get treatment at Hazelbrook. While at the program I thought I was doing amazing and figured I could handle anything that came my way. News flash, I didn't. **I relapsed on a Friday, knowing that on Monday, I had sentencing for my distribution case. The contingency of my bond was to be in Hazelbrook. Later on that night, after running out of money and drugs, sitting at the Perry station, high, cold, lonely, scared, disgusted, and embarrassed, I called my house manager and asked for her advice. She told me that I could go to the TSZ program in Aurora. Talk about a wonderful, comfortable, understanding, non-judgemental, safe place to detox and get your mind back.** I walked in there with the clothes on my back. I met the most amazing women there. I felt like they understood me, they didn't judge me and they helped me with everything I needed from soap to socks. I didn't have to worry about anything but getting myself sober and emotionally stable. I built a strong foundation and community of sober women whom I'm still in contact with to this day. I'm happy to say I've been sober since April 13th, 2024. I'm employed at the Women's Bean Project. I'm in recovery court. Most importantly, I'm a part of my 2 beautiful children's lives again. I have my own 3 bedroom apartment for my kids and I, and I have had the privilege to hear my dad tell me that he is proud of me. All thanks to the selfless women and men who operate the TSZ program. They believed in me when I didn't and encouraged me to keep fighting and never give up.

- Michelle Garcia

# TSZ TESTIMONIALS

## Gabrielle Meyers

My name is Gabrielle and this is just the beginning of my new story. The story of how my life got saved, thanks to God, TSZ, and myself. Before finding TSZ I was in and out of jail, living on the streets on drugs and committing crimes. Every time I would go to jail I would tell myself that this time is going to be different, this time I am going to find a sober living home and get my life back together. I would get released from jail with high hopes of a better life, and I was always let down because I could not find a sober living that would take me straight from jail with no money to pay rent. So I would always end up going back to drugs because that is what I knew and with no structure or stability in my life I could not find a job to save money to get into a sober living.

The very last time I went to jail after so many failed attempts I knew that I needed to have a solid plan before I was released. So I started working with a case manager in Denver County Jail and searching for sober living options. I found a sober living house that would accept vouchers from my probation officer, so finally I thought things were going to work out. Upon my release I called the sober living house and made sure I still had a bed, and then I called probation to set up the voucher so I could move into my new home. Unfortunately once again things were not as easy as I thought they would be. When I called probation they told me that they would not be able to pay the full amount that the sober living house was asking for and I would have to pay the remainder. Yet I was fresh out of jail with nothing to my name aside from a clear garbage bag filled with mostly paperwork. As an addict reaching out for help is not always easy, but at this point in my life I was begging for help. And still, nothing was working out for me. So once again I ended up turning to the streets and to drugs because I didn't know where else to turn.

Then about 2 weeks later, I remember looking around at where my life had once again ended up. I was depressed, exhausted, lonely, bitter, full of regret and guilt, surrounded by people who could care less of what happened to me, and hating every moment of my days. So I prayed, I prayed and begged God to please help me find a way out. I knew that this was not the life I was supposed to be living. A while later, I was sifting through my garbage bag of things from jail and I found a book I had gotten in jail called the "Go Guide" . I pulled it out of my small amount of belongings and started reading. In that book is where I found Hazelbrook TSZ. It was one of the only places I had not tried yet. So I called. The woman that answered the phone, her name was Kamella, was kind and compassionate...she listened to me and I believe that she could hear the pain and desperation in my voice. She told me that she could get me a bed that very day. I told her that I had no money, and I had drugs in my system. I was expecting to get turned away after telling her that, because that is what every other place had done after finding out I could not pay them and could not pass a UA. I was surprised when she told me that she could still help me, and the only thing I needed to do was to make it to the community center and their staff would handle the rest. I almost couldn't believe it because it felt too good to be true after all I had been through.



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I wish I could say that I got up and ran to them immediately when she told me I could come in that day, but I did not. It took me about a week to actually get the courage to get there. I do remember calling her almost everyday that week and telling her that I still wanted to come and asking if she would still take me. I think part of me was expecting her to say enough is enough and turn me away, but she never did. Every time I called she met me with understanding and showed me grace. Then on October 3rd of 2022 I made it. When I got to the community center a wonderful woman named Kim picked me up to take me to the TSZ program. She listened to my fears, she let me cry, she bought me food, and she didn't rush me into it knowing I was scared and untrusting. Once again I was met with genuine compassion, patience and love from a complete stranger, something I hadn't seen in a very long time.

I finally made it to the TSZ Phase One house and went through intake and got myself settled. The next two weeks were very tough detoxing from meth and fentanyl. But the staff was so kind to me and so helpful and mostly they did not judge where I was at, what I had been through, or what I was going through and they showed me so much love. The only thing I had to worry about during that time was getting myself better. I didn't have to worry about how I was going to feed myself, I didn't have to worry about trying to hustle up money so I could hopefully find somewhere with a roof to sleep at night. Everything I truly needed was provided to me at no cost by TSZ.

I made it through Phase One of TSZ and went to Phase Two. While at Phase Two I met Pam Clifton. She teaches the relapse prevention classes each night at the house and I quickly found out that she was the woman who had written the "Go Guide". I felt so much gratitude for her because it was that very book that led me to safety. I graduated from the Phase Two of TSZ (I still proudly have my certificate and graduation picture to this day.) and then I transitioned into a long term sober living house with Hazelbrook. After finally having some structure, stability and accountability in my life I was able to stay clean. I was able to make the necessary changes in my life to become a better woman. I built true friendships and accomplished a lot in a short amount of time. I had been in Hazelbrook for almost 8 months when I received an offer to come back to the TSZ program as a staff member. I accepted the job and unknowingly walked into a job that would become my passion. Helping other women that are just like me. I have been working as a House manager for TSZ for a little over a year now. It is such a blessing that I now get to be that kind, compassionate, understanding and loving stranger to all of the women who come through TSZ today.

Since I first came through TSZ the program has changed and expanded and grown in so many beautiful ways and we are helping women on an even deeper level than when I experienced TSZ myself. I believe that we will continue to grow and learn and help hundreds and thousands of lives with this program. I have maintained almost 19 months of sobriety now, I have successfully completed probation, I have moved into my own apartment, I have money in a savings account and can support myself, I am rebuilding a relationship with my daughter who I just was able to visit for the first time in almost 3 years, I have created relationships with women in TSZ that I believe will last a lifetime, I have become a peer recovery coach and received other certifications, and I get to help other women every day and be a part of their testimony when their life changes just as much as mine has.

All of these things I have accomplished, and all of the growth I have done as a woman, a friend and a mother all started with TSZ. I don't know of any other program that asks nothing of people except to just show up. If this program did not exist, I honestly believe I would still be out there, sleeping behind dumpsters and in abandoned storage units, stealing cars and going in

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and out of jail eventually leading to prison or even worse, death. I would still be out there wishing for something more but not having anywhere to turn and feeling lost and alone. I am forever grateful for the TSZ program and the staff that showed me love when I felt unlovable. My life has completely changed and I am so passionate about this program.

Thank you for reading,

Gabrielle Meyers

## **Alicia Valencia**

TSZ has not just saved my life once but it has also saved my life twice. This amazing program has turned my life into something I never thought was possible. In addition we never see the light in our journey, we think this is all we have and all that we are. But once you step through the doors of TSZ we see the journey has a new beginning, we see that there is a possibility of change. Seeing the success stories with the house managers and the outreach has a big impact of knowing that there is life after becoming sober. It is a work in progress within yourself, the first day is always the hardest. Having the love and support of everyone who is around, who knows that it is hard but being there to know that everything is ok and will be ok even though you don't feel like nothing will be. They gave me a bed when I was living on the streets, a shower when I haven't showered in weeks, food when I weighed 75 lbs the first time. Even when there is a relapse they welcome you back with open arms and tell you it's all going to be ok. If it wasn't for the TSZ program I would still be out on the streets struggling with being active in my addiction, or worse unalive. They have taught me that there is fun to be had in sobriety. There are endless possibilities that God can bless you with this program if you stick with it. There is light when all you thought there could be was darkness. They have shown me that life is beautiful, in the life of sobriety. They have turned my life 360° around by showing; love, compassion, generosity and faith. They never give up on you even when you want to give up on yourself. My soul and life was saved November 21, 2022 and January 2nd, 2024. I am beyond grateful for this program and the people in it.

Sincerely,

Alicia Valencia

## **Chanse Romagnoli**

I hope this letter finds you well. I just wanted to take a moment to share with you how much the TSZ program at Hazelbrook has meant to me and how it's changed my life in ways I never thought possible. Before I found TSZ, I was lost in the depths of addiction, feeling like I had nothing left to live for. I was stuck in a cycle of despair, with no clear way out. But then, through the grace of whatever powers that be, I stumbled upon Hazelbrook and the TSZ program. From the moment I walked through those doors, I felt a sense of hope wash over me. It was like stepping into a warm embrace, surrounded by people who understood exactly what I was going through. The staff and fellow residents welcomed me with open arms, offering support and guidance every step of the way. TSZ wasn't just a detox program for me—it was a lifeline. It provided me with the tools and resources I needed to break free from the chains of addiction and start rebuilding my life. Through therapy, counseling, and group sessions, I learned how to confront my demons head-on and take control of my future. But perhaps the

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most invaluable aspect of TSZ was the sense of community it fostered. For the first time in a long time, I didn't feel alone. I was surrounded by people who believed in me, who cheered me on through the tough days and celebrated my victories, no matter how small. And the best part? TSZ is completely free. For someone like me, who came from the streets with nothing but the clothes on my back, that meant everything. It gave me a chance when I didn't think I deserved one, and for that, I will be forever grateful. Today, I stand before you as a testament to the power of TSZ and the incredible work that Hazelbrook is doing. I am sober, I am happy, and I am living a life beyond my wildest dreams—all thanks to this program and the unwavering support of the amazing people behind it. So, from the bottom of my heart, thank you. Thank you for giving me a second chance, for believing in me when I couldn't believe in myself, and for showing me that recovery is possible, even in the darkest of times.

Thank you,

Chanse Rees

## **Katrena Duran**

I am writing to share my personal experience with the TSZ program and how it has positively impacted my life. I recently went through a difficult time when I suffered an injury and experienced a relapse while I was away from the program. However, finding my way back to TSZ was a turning point for me.

Upon my return, I was surrounded by people who could relate to me and were part of the recovery community. Their support, love, and nurturing attitudes motivated me to heal and regain my strength. The camaraderie and positive environment helped me focus on my recovery and work towards living a productive, complete life.

Thanks to the TSZ program, I had access to resources and support that were essential to my healing, both mentally and physically. The program provided me with the necessary pharmaceutical care and other resources, making my recovery journey smoother and more manageable.

Since leaving the TSZ program, I have used the tools and skills I gained there to stay in recovery. I have successfully worked my relapse prevention plan and have accomplished significant milestones. I obtained my driver's license, secured gainful employment, and rebuilt stronger communication skills with the people most important to me.

Without the TSZ program, I wouldn't have had the opportunity to receive the care and support I needed to achieve these milestones. I am truly grateful for the impact it has had on my life and many others. I hope that you will continue to support this incredible program so that more individuals can benefit from it, just as I have.

Thank you for considering my story and the importance of the TSZ program.

Sincerely,

Katrena Duran

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## Michelle Garcia

I would like to start off by saying thank you for the beautiful opportunity of getting sober in a safe, loving, comfortable therapeutic environment and getting support learning imperative life long recovery skills.

From the first conversation I felt welcomed, warmth and love with no judgment. That was such an amazing feeling. I walked into Hazelbrook TSZ phase 1 with literally the clothes on my back. Knowing that everything I needed to be comfortable, fed, showered, safe and being provided with clean pillows, blankets and towels was a big relief. Being able to get over the counter medicine for headaches, body aches, upset stomach, nausea, diarrhea, and melatonin to help sleep was a blessing and greatly appreciated. I was able to focus on myself getting clean and sober with no barriers. Witnessing the staff go above and beyond to help each and every one of us ladies individually to meet our specific needs was truly an inspirational life-changing experience. I would have never been able to get clean and sober and determined to focus on my long-term recovery if it was not for all of the staff. These individuals are truly powerhouse women and they are saving lives everyday. I especially would like to thank each and every grantor who funds this Hazelbrook TSZ program. Words cannot express my gratitude. This program literally saved my life and for that I want to say I appreciate each and everyone of you from the bottom of my heart. This program 100% works, this program is one of many who has the highest success rate. I'm walking proof. If I had not walked into the door that day I probably would not be here anymore. The scholarship that is given to each graduate of the TSZ program is absolutely remarkable. Not only does this program allow us to get our mind right, get clean and sober and gain imperative skills to our long-term recovery. You extend your kindness, love and generosity to see each and every one of us graduates continue to thrive in a sober living of our choice, this is phenomenal. So thank you very much for everything that you're doing for the Hazelbrook TSZ recovery community. It's a beautiful blessing.

I'm a recent graduate of the Hazelbrook TSZ program and I'm feeling grateful for this beautiful blessing. I'm transitioning to another Hazelbrook Sober Living and I honestly could not have done it without this Transitional Safety Zone program. I'm coming up on my 30 day mark of being sober and I am proud of myself. While in this program I was able to get a therapist, a sponsor, attend meetings and built a strong community of sober like-minded women who I can seek during rough times.

I would love to see this Transitional Safety Zone program flourish this upcoming year. It really is a wonderful feeling for people seeking recovery, sobriety and change to know they can walk into a safe place and be comforted by a wonderful community of sober like-minded people to lean on. Thank you for everything, I couldn't be happier with the help I received during this crucial time. This is exactly what I needed to find myself and to know that I am worth it so thank you very much.

Warmly,

Michelle Garcia

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## **Esther Beltran**

The TSZ program has proven to be highly effective in helping individuals achieve long-term sobriety. Having worked with many women who have benefited from this program, I have seen first-hand how it provides a safe and welcoming environment for individuals to work towards their goal of sobriety. Unlike traditional 30-day programs, TSZ is completely voluntary and led by peers in recovery. This program offers a unique approach to recovery, as individuals can relate to and support each other through their struggles. The TSZ program provides a more comprehensive and sustainable approach to recovery, making it the clear choice for those determined to achieve their goals.

I have witnessed this program's transformative impact on individuals' lives. I have seen women reunited with their children and families brought back together lovingly. TSZ graduates have returned to school, earned degrees, found stable employment and housing, and achieved many other goals.

The TSZ program provides a much-needed safe space for individuals to heal and thrive. People have shared with me that the compassion and kindness they received have helped them succeed confidently and saved their lives. Additionally, the program offers assistance with obtaining necessary documents like IDs, SS cards, and birth certificates, as well as access to dental and healthcare services, individual self-paced trauma therapy, and support for legal obligations. None of these services are provided in traditional 30-day programming. The TSZ program serves and welcomes all individuals who want to be sober and improve their lives, regardless of their ability to pay or background. This in itself makes TSZ unique.

The TSZ program's contribution to the Denver/Metro community is insurmountable. It has continued to save lives and bring families together, helping clients end homelessness and find stable employment.

Thank you for your time in advance,

Esther Y. Beltran CPRC

## **Pete Estrada**

Before TSZ I had a very low quality of life to say the least. I had no goals, no ambition and a very little hope. I tried quitting on my own a number of times and failed because I had no foundation to stand on. I tried rehab after rehab but because I wasn't willing to completely surrender that never worked either.

Before TSZ I had about 45 days or so sober. I had a recurrence in Albuquerque NM blacked out and woke up at Aurora South. An old family friend who was in Hazelbrook was there to visit me and asked if I was ready to really quit. I said yes and I have been here since.

TSZ saved my life. When I got to the phase 1 house all I wanted to do was feel better. I had no idea I would come this far. I have accomplished more in that last year than I have in my entire life. This is longest I've been sober since I was 12.

I am so grateful for what I've been through and for what I'm going through because deep down inside I truly know that I've gained way more than I ever had to give up. TSZ has blessed

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me in so many ways and has been so good to me. TSZ helped me find my place in this world and has also allowed me to fight the battle of addiction from the front lines.

My heart weeps for all small towns out there that don't have programs like this. This program is a part of me now and goes wherever I go. One day I plan to move back to NM and help as many people as I can and share this beautiful culture and way of life with anyone who wants to change.

Thank you all so much for showing me what a beautiful struggle looks like.

## **Tamara Uthe**

Hello my name is Tamara Uthe and I successfully went through the TSZ program. A little bit about me I have struggled with a meth addiction since I was 14, at the age of 36 became an alcoholic. Due to my alcoholism and drug use I caught a case in 2020. I was on the run for two years and finally turned myself in in 2022. I received two year's probation. I entered TSZ in October of 2022. Thanks in large part to Hazelbrook I am 18 months sober. Without the grant money I would have never entered rehab. I now have a relationship with my two children and am on track to becoming a Peer Coach. Thanks to all who have given me my life back.

## **Devon Smith**

I was extremely nervous to start this program. I wasn't sure how TSZ could help me with my goals; or how it would help me achieve sobriety . My Church JOC helped me contact them. I didn't know I would come in contact with Alison Turner. She walked me through every step. Alison is so very kind, and has a heart of gold. She made sure I had the knowledge of where to go, she even provided a ride for me, so I didn't have to walk. She talked to me on the phone, told me she was proud of me, and shared her story with me. TSZ was the building block I needed. I was able to become sober, change into the beautiful person I am today. I was able to take classes and learn to ask for help. I was able to meet a lot of wonderful people along the way. I was able to be in the IOP classes; which gave me incredible insight. This program is necessary and amazing; I believe there are people who will benefit tremendously from this program. It saved my life, and I would do it again. I was able to get a fantastic career, in a field I love. Please allow this program to continue.

## **James “Jimmy” Fairbrother**

My name is Jimmy and I am writing this letter in regards to my gratitude and appreciation for the Hazelbrook Tsz Program.

I'll start by saying that I had been trying to get clean and sober for the better part of the last 8 years. I have tried everything from quitting on my own to an extended stay in a rehabilitation facility and even jail and prison. Nothing seemed to be what I needed or suitable for my needs without me feeling trapped, or given too much or too little structure. The Tsz program was a breath of fresh air and was exactly what I needed in order to truly start my journey in recovery. I am now 8 months sober. This is the longest consecutive amount of time i've been sober since I was a teenager.

I felt safe, I felt welcomed, I was given a structure that included a peer coaching program,, relapse prevention, and strong bonds with other residents as well as the TSZ staff.

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They are the ones that made me feel like a human and saw something in me motivating me to move forward into some sort of leadership program. Since starting this program I have become a house manager, a supervisor briefly while starting up the ACP program, a big part of the maintenance team, and a peer coach. I can't believe all of this could happen to me in such a short period of time. I have surpassed so many goals that I have set myself and I am very proud of where I am and who I've become. I now have gained back the trust and respect from my family and am making amends with my ex wife and am able to be in my children's life once again. And to me that is what truly matters. I owe TSZ my life and my family is just as grateful as I am .

Now as a TSZ phase 1 house manager I am able to help clients in the same way I was helped. I have had many sit downs with clients that say that this place is a blessing and have the same views as I do. Though there are some clients that say that this isn't the program for them or they need a different level of care, I completely understand. People are in different stages in their recovery and need different care. but I feel that's the great thing about the TSZ program though. It's a place for people struggling to get a fresh start, and given guidance and resources. even if that means it's not in our program. We are able to offer our broad spectrum of services to those in need or at the very least the resources that they need wherever they are in their recovery. At the TSZ program there shouldn't be any worry for our clients in regards to anything really. We are blessed to be able to provide food, donation clothing, outside MAT services, a dental program, and any outside emergency medical services. Through our peer coaches, we are able to provide help with obtaining ID, birth certificates, EBT, and help with transportation and job search through the hazelbrook community center.

In conclusion all I really have to say is that the TSZ Program is a godsend. It is a major stepping stone for a lot of people. I wish there were more programs like this.

Thank you for your time,

Jimmy Fairbrother

## **Ashley Neumann**

My name is Ashley Neumann. I am a graduate of the TSZ program and of sober living in general. The life I had known for 85% of my life consisted of shooting heroin and meth, xanax, lies, cheating, stealing and running from the law at ALL COSTS!! I was heavily and I mean HEAVILY addicted to the drugs but even more so to the "adventure of the unknown"! I was so addicted to both the drugs and the life that I had an abortion at 7 months ( more so because he was extremely sick with Cystic Hygromas). I completely lost all sight of hope and of anything that was good!! I have ODed more times than I ever wanted to admit! I have lost more family and best friends than I ever want to admit. I got my best friends in the world hooked on heroin all because of my selfishness and not wanting to be the only asshole on it! I lost my best friend to a heroin overdose 7 years ago, all because I didn't want to be alone in the madness!! Right after I lost him, I met the love of my life (and we're still together), fast forward to 5.5years later he gave me the BEST ULTIMATUM, got sober or he's walking away from me for good!! A few days later, I called the most incredible lady, Alison Turner, and asked her if she was available to pick me up, because I was exhausted and I wanted something more with my life.

I walked into The TSZ program on November 23, 2022 all strung out from heroin, fentanyl, meth and xanax. From that day on I have completely turned my life around! I literally just PASSED ALL OF MY FINALS for school so I can become a Veterinarian Tech Assistant!! I graduate on

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May 9th, 2024!!! I start my Dream Job in a veterinarian clinic on May 6th! I have my license back after 13 years of running from the law on a DUI!! I had 2 old warrants for drugs and theft DROPPED AND DISMISSED by the DA AND THE JUDGE!!! Which I have never experienced in my life!!

I wouldn't be where I am today if it wasn't for the TSZ program!! That program deserves to be here for good!! They have helped so many people, including me!!! There are no programs like the TSZ program, they accept you even when people have stuff in their systems!! That's the most amazing part!!! Please give them the funds so they may continue to help people just like I was in for years to come!!!!

Ashley Neumann

## **Anastasia Balensiefen**

I hope this letter finds you well. My name is Anastasia Balensiefen, and I am reaching out to express my profound gratitude for the life-changing impact of the Transitional Safety Zone Program at Hazelbrook Sober Living.

For over 16 years, I wrestled with the grip of addiction. Methamphetamine and opiates held me in their sway, and for nearly 6 years, I battled an overwhelming fentanyl dependency. In the depths of despair, I felt utterly lost, resigned to a fate of addiction and self-loathing. Each day seemed to drag on under the weight of hopelessness, and I found myself wishing for an end to the chaos, yearning for release through overdose.

Amidst this darkness, a beacon of hope emerged in the form of a call from my dear friend, Dylan. His voice carried the light of possibility as he shared his own journey through the remarkable TSZ program at Hazelbrook Sober Living. With compassion and urgency, he spoke of a bed waiting for me, an opportunity for transformation guided by the caring hands of individuals like Allison, the Case Manager of the women's program.

In a world where many avenues to recovery seemed gated by financial barriers and legal hurdles, TSZ stood apart. They extended their hand to those like me, destitute and downtrodden, offering not just assistance but genuine care and support. From facilitating court resolutions to aiding in the retrieval of essential documents like my ID, Social Security Card, and Birth Certificate, TSZ embraced me with open arms, recognizing my humanity amidst the chaos of addiction.

Through their guidance and unwavering belief in my potential, TSZ breathed new life into my weary soul. They didn't just offer a program; they offered a lifeline, a pathway to a future brimming with hope and possibility. In their eyes, I was not merely an addict but a person deserving of dignity and respect. Without the TSZ program, I shudder to think where I might be today, for they provided not just a program but a haven of hope in the storm of addiction.

I am eternally grateful for the profound impact TSZ has had on my life and the lives of countless others in Colorado. Their dedication to serving those most in need is a beacon of light in a world too often marred by judgment and indifference.

Thank you for taking the time to read my heartfelt testament.



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With deepest gratitude,

Anastasia Balensiefen

## **Krystal Nicole Kyle**

In early 2022, I embarked on a journey of recovery, finding myself fighting for my life. Following my release from prison on February 15, 2022, I enrolled in the TSZ program on February 18, 2022. Attending Pam Clifton's Relapse Prevention class was a transformative experience that began a new chapter in my life. The TSZ program is designed to facilitate introspection, enabling participants to view themselves from a different perspective. It focuses on sobriety, rebuilding one's life, and self-love. The program taught me that I deserve a better life and that my life is worth fighting for. Internal surrender is a prerequisite for sobriety to occur. As of May 3, 2024, I have been sober for 33 months and am currently working as a Phase 1 Manager for the TSZ Program and a Certified Peer Recovery Coach. This program saved my life over two years ago, and without it, I would not know where I would be today. It is the most extended period of sobriety that I have had in over 20 years. The program has saved hundreds of lives, and we are just getting started. So many people need our help to succeed. As a manager, I have had the privilege of helping women achieve their goals, regain confidence, and find hope in life. The TSZ program is the foundation and the pillar for their recovery journey. It is not just a recovery program but also a home filled with support, patience, and love. I have personally benefited from this program, and I am delighted to offer my assistance in helping others. My recovery journey has been grueling, but in the end, it has been an enriching experience. The program has taught me the values of freedom, health, safety, sanity, hope, independence, satisfaction, happiness, courage, goals, support, team, strength, patience, and family. The TSZ program has helped me find a new sense of freedom from addiction, and I finally feel whole again. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Krystal Nicole Kyle

## **Devdan Godany**

26 months ago I arrived at Hazelbrook's Transitional Safety Zone (TSZ) program. It's the first substance use treatment program I have tried, and I'm happy to say I'm still in remission with my substance use disorder today. TSZ was a very smooth transition that started when I got out of jail and began my probation sentence. The only sobriety time I had was during the 96 days I was in detention. I knew I needed support to successfully complete probation. TSZ was a more attractive option than 30 day rehab since I would be able to go for walks in public and take care of my day-to-day business much sooner than a 30 day program. Also, I was able to spend time with my mother for the short time she was in town.

The ways TSZ benefitted me are numerous. I was introduced to the peer based model of recovery, where I can learn about tools and techniques used by people who have been successful with their recovery. I learned through my relationships with other sober people in the

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program that sobriety is not 'lame' or 'boring;' rather fulfilling and refreshing. The staff are more than just workers: they are role models, big brothers and sisters, and they cared enough to encourage me to make progress. I had a negative view of sobriety, but the staff and peers influenced me to be connected to the community and make my wellbeing a top priority.

Currently I have the pleasure of working in the TSZ program. It brings me bliss to see the majority of TSZ graduates experiencing success and improved well being in their lives. This overwhelming success seems to stem directly from the peer recovery model practiced in these houses. The sense of community brings individuals up when they are at their lowest, even during acute withdrawals from drugs. Seeing otherwise isolated and forgotten people open up about their problems to residents and staff proves they feel like they are in a nurturing and safe environment. Dozens of people have told me that they were relieved to show up at a residential house instead of a facility that looks more like a factory than a recovery program. I know that this residential setting is a big foundation for our success because it is aligned with people's goals of owning a comfortable house of their own. People in Hazelbrook TSZ are succeeding by learning the skills they need to be happy and healthy in a residential setting.

The Denver Metro community needs Hazelbrook's Transitional Safety Zone as well as more programs like it. Drug abuse is currently an epidemic in our city, and this program has already made a large difference in changing the minds of those affected and helping them become stewards and role models for individuals still suffering from the disease of substance use disorder.

Sincerely,

Devdan Godany, House Manager, Peer Support Specialist