



PHOTO BY EMILY GREEN

A group of advocates rides a bus to Salem to participate in a lobby day rally organized by Oregon Recovers, a coalition led by people in recovery.

UNLIKELY LOBBYISTS TURN RECOVERY INTO POWER

BY EMILY GREEN
SENIOR STAFF REPORTER

Oregonians who have battled addiction are banding together to push for meaningful reforms to the state's fractured substance abuse treatment system

Jay Z's "Marcy Me" reverberated throughout the room, drowning out sounds of billiard balls knocking into each other as a couple of 20-somethings in baggy clothes swung their cues. About a dozen other young adults lounged around black leather sofas arranged in a square nearby. Some had face and neck tattoos; most carried a conditioned persona, showcasing their street cred.

Outside on the back patio, three men compared rap sheets and war stories as they smoked cigarettes. One passed around his most recent mug shot, displayed on his smartphone. "I got caught with a gun," he said.

It was 7 a.m. on Tuesday, Feb. 13, and these unlikely lobbyists were all waiting for a bus to take them from Portland to Salem, where they planned to walk the halls of the Capitol building, sharing their stories with lawmakers.

While most had never talked to a legislator before – and weren't sure what they would say when they did – they were unflinching in their determination to have their voices heard. They

know firsthand how difficult it can be to access drug and alcohol treatment in Oregon, and today they were going to do something about it.

The majority were members of the 4th Dimension Recovery Center on Northeast Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, where they had begun gathering at 6 that morning. It's a place where people ages 13 to 35 who are in recovery from substance abuse can get addiction treatment and support or simply hang out with other young people who are also in recovery.

Also there, waiting for the bus, were several older, more professionally dressed men and women in recovery programs just up the road at Volunteers of America, along with a few drug and alcohol counselors and peer mentors.

Once in Salem, they would all join a lobby day rally organized by Oregon Recovers, a coalition led by people in long-term recovery.

Oregon Recovers is attempting to do something that's never been done before in Oregon: bring together the thousands of Oregonians who are in recovery to form a constituency aimed solely at reforming what they say is a fractured and under-funded system of drug and alcohol treatment, prevention and recovery programs.

Its vision is for Oregon to become a state where anyone can have immediate access to effective drug and alcohol treatment when they need it, followed with continuing community-based support. It wants addiction to be

recognized as a health issue, not a criminal justice issue, and to incorporate a broad range of treatment and recovery options that include harm reduction strategies.

While it's unknown exactly how many people in Oregon are in recovery from substance abuse, nationwide, it's estimated at roughly 25 million people, according to a 2016 report from the U.S. Surgeon General.

That's why Tony Vezina, director of the 4th Dimension Recovery Center and a key organizer at Oregon Recovers, says he hopes to see hundreds of thousands more join the statewide effort as it progresses.

If harnessed, it's a constituency whose sheer size could give it tremendous political power, but the stigma and shame attached to substance abuse is a challenge organizers know they have to overcome.

The school bus that would transport the group south that morning was running late after malfunctioning in sub-freezing temperatures, but it finally rolled up just before 8 a.m.

Many of the more than 30 people onsite told Street Roots that, despite trying, they weren't able to access meaningful drug and alcohol treatment until after they were arrested and charged with a crime.

When a person enters publicly funded treatment through the court system, many

See RECOVERY, page 5