

Towards a Recovery Bill of Responsibilities: Stewardship of the Recovery Commons – William Stauffer

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of both [Operation Understanding](#) and [Freedom Fest '76](#), two of the most significant events in our history. The moment when some of the most respected Americans stood up publicly to be counted as members of the recovery community and to make recovery visible in our society. They stood up so others may get help. They stood up against the societal negative perspectives about who and what we are as recovering people. They stood up for people who would come after them, so that we may have an easier time accessing services and supports to sustain recovery. They stood up out of a sense of responsibility to pay forward the gifts of recovery that they had realized in their own lives. They stood up because no one else had and someone needed to do so.

The Legacy We Inherited

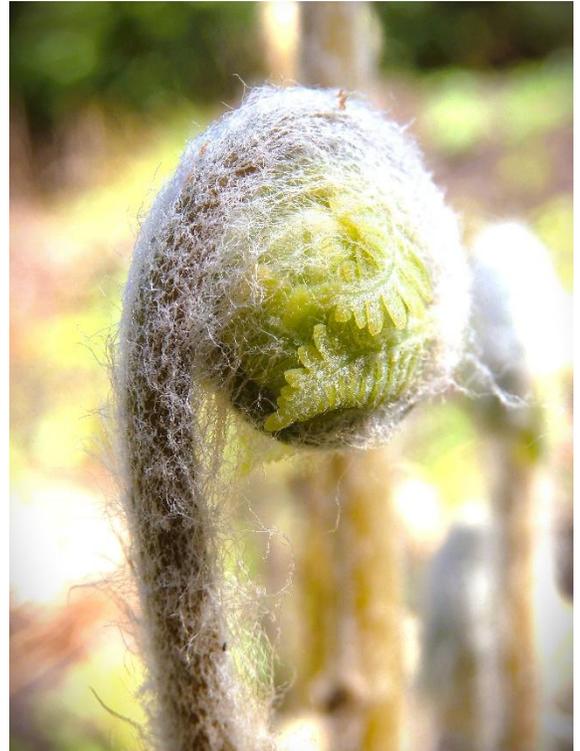
Fifty years later, we have a conceptual gap. The recovery movement can be understood as a commons. Our entire system of care has been built and sustained by generations of people who believed recovery should be accessible to everyone. All movements require not only the articulation of rights to expand, but the acceptance of responsibilities to carry forward. Over recent decades, most of our energy has focused on defining rights and expanding services while our responsibilities to sustaining a movement have been neglected. The focus on expanding rights and opportunities to support recovery has been crucial to our progress. Vital because of long term discrimination centered on people who have experienced addiction. This focus came from the most positive place, a desire to pay it forward and remove barriers to fair and effective care and support. This sense of responsibility to the greater whole, the desire to engage in service to others itself is a hallmark of recovery. Many of us share values associated with service to others. Yet, despite this broad commonality how often have we neglected the other side of the coin, our responsibilities to each other, the movement and for future generations to expand recovery transmission?

Rights and responsibilities are inseparable. Perhaps we should more actively discuss our shared responsibility to each other and to future generations. In our silence forces that erode us fester in the darkness. There have always been those among us who historian and recovery advocate William L. White termed "[hustlers and hucksters](#)." Individuals, sadly and far too often in recovery themselves who exploit vulnerable people and families for personal, financial, or ideological gain under the banner of "treatment," "recovery," or "reform." White described hucksters and hustlers as:

- **Those who commercialize hope.** Those who hawk elixirs and miracle cures, proprietary models, or carnival bark exaggerated success rates and claims. Just buy the product or the message and you will be cured.
- **Individuals who prey on desperation.** Those who target families in crisis with unproven or unethical services while the real intervention is the removal of money and hope from loved ones.
- **Entrepreneurs without ethics.** Recovery capitalists, who charge as much as possible, pack as many people as possible into a program and provide poor quality care for the most amount of money, placing the profit motive above patient care or the common welfare of the recovery movement.
- **Self-appointed "experts."** Deacons proclaiming simple and yet false answers yet who lack grounding in science, lived experience, integrity, or accountability yet assure all who will listen that they have the fix.

The Missing Conversation: Responsibilities

As described above, while we have enumerations of rights for our community, to the best of my knowledge, there are no widely agreed on facets of a Recovery Bill of Responsibilities. A guide for our Common Good that balances rights language with articulated obligations to the movement. While this is the case, among his other efforts to highlight these concerns, William White and I a few years back penned [We Need More Recovery Custodians and Fewer Recovery Rock Stars](#) to highlight the value of humble servant leaders and to illuminate the risks of rock star leadership that our history reveals. A topic I have revisited a few time [separately as well](#). This includes my 2024 essay, [The Keel of the New Recovery Advocacy Movement: Our Steering Concepts](#), that considers how mutually agreed upon tenets of conduct



helped steer the movement to successful outcomes. These historic steering concepts included, a unified message, the assertion that people in recovery are the experts on recovery and a commitment to “stay in our own lane” and to ask others to do the same. These were effective in the moment but gradually forgotten and fell by the wayside over time.

Recovery Stewardship Why Boundary Maintenance Matters

As recovery initiates, we may start out as service recipients, ideally as co-collaborators to form our own recovery sustained over time in ways that connect us to communities of recovery that nurture us. Our process evolve as we gain a voice to advocate for our own needs. To see our own lives as valuable enough to stand up for. We then observe what others do, receive support and experiment with processes that resonate with us. As we grow, what can often happen in a sustained recovery trajectory is an awareness of things larger than ourselves. A sense of deep humility as we become aware that many people over the long course of history paid forward for us in order that we be afforded a shot at life. As we become aware of this, we begin to pay it forward ourselves. To engage in service. To be stewards of recovery and ensure that future generations can also gain a foothold in recovery and thrive. It is a calling many generations before us carried forward through their life cycles and delivered on the doorstep of our own.

If you work, live, or participate in the SUD treatment and recovery space, it is important to consider your responsibilities to the broader community. If you are in recovery, please consider our collective responsibility to each other and people who come after us in respect to identifying bias and disparate care. Our shared responsibilities to effectively address these challenges and reap the societal benefits of widespread recovery across all of our communities. If you are outside of the recovery community and have some role in service provision, policy development, care evaluation or research, you have a responsibility to ensure you do not do things that are harmful to us. An obligation to uphold the fundamental right of people to be meaningfully involved in their own healing. This includes all facets of the process from point of design, to implementation, facilitation, and evaluation.

Kinds of Responsibilities to Consider:

One of the principal ways that generations before our own were able to move efforts forward was to highlight the value of recovery. To place that broader societal benefit ahead of personal gain. To establish boundaries and not allow groups with outside agendas who act as false flag confederates to derail our efforts. To ensure that people who are vulnerable to exploitation are protected from the myriad of hustlers and hucksters that have always been present. To defend authentic recovery processes when they were at risk to be co-opted or undermined. To advocate for the greater good whenever they are able. To be truthful and transparent. To contribute more than one consumes so that recovery processes remain plentiful. To remain teachable as we grow. To support high ethical standards. To transmit what we have learned to the next generation.

How do we engage in Boundary Maintenance?

There have long been false flag confederates. They purport to be advocating for recovery, the emancipation from the chains of addiction and despair and renewal of new capacities. They wear this mask while their true goals are otherwise. They may be hawking a treatment center, a medication or a policy agenda. They may be working to siphon off energy of the movement to coopt it for other movements goals. They may present addiction treatment, mental health services, or harm reduction as interchangeable with addiction recovery itself. While we share important goals with these fields, they are not the same thing.

At our best over the course of our history, we have served to ask other groups to “stay in their own lane” as we keep ourselves in check to do the same and to keep our eye on the prize of recovery. Yet in this era we rarely talk about these boundaries or our responsibilities to maintain them. We may tend to avoid setting boundaries out of deference for their goals, to be respectful and polite and even in circumstances where groups shout us down. They pursue scorched earth approaches to burn everything down if anyone takes a stance inconsistent with their views. The end result of any of these processes is the diffusion of movement energy to the point of ineffectiveness. The question at the end of the day for individuals and groups, what do we see as a central purpose to further recovery goals and are we willing to do so? If not us, then who will?

It is increasingly apparent that the recovery movement now stands at a crossroads. It can remain a shared commons grounded in service, integrity, and collective responsibility, or it can fragment into competing commercial, ideological, and personal interests that erode its integrity and effectiveness over time. If this is our course, we will drop the ball and fail to deliver an effective movement to the next generation. The task before us is clear. We must begin to articulate,

teach, and uphold our shared responsibilities to the recovery commons. We must cultivate custodians, not celebrities. Stewards, not owners. Humble servants, not recovery capitalist, hustlers and hucksters focused on self gain.

If we are successful, the recovery movement will remain strong, credible, and accessible to those who need it most, not only today, but for many generations to come.

Toward a Recovery Bill of Responsibilities: A Framework for Stewardship, Integrity, and the Common Good

Recovery is grounded in community. It is a “we thing” not an “I thing.” We grow through participation in an evolving commons built by thousands of people who came before us through sacrifice, service, and courage. We have a responsibility to history to do the same. The recovery supports, protections, and opportunities that exist today were not inevitable; they were all at one time or another considered impossible. Yet they were created, defended, and sustained by individuals who accepted responsibility not only for themselves, but for others. It is our turn at the helm.

Just as recovery confers rights, it also confers responsibilities. These responsibilities are not obligations imposed by authority, but duties freely accepted as part of stewardship to pay forward our shared and fragile inheritance. The future of recovery depends upon the willingness of each generation to protect our collective integrity, effectiveness, accessibility, and justness of cause. This first draft of a Bill of Responsibilities is open to revision. It is an attempt to affirm the shared obligations of individuals, organizations, professionals, researchers, policymakers, and all who participate in the recovery ecosystem.

I. Responsibility to Protect the Integrity of Recovery: *We affirm our responsibility to preserve the honesty, authenticity, and integrity of authentic recovery processes. Recovery must remain as grounded in our resilience, not become a vehicle for exploitation. This may include:*

- Speaking truthfully about recovery, neither exaggerating nor diminishing its realities.
- Avoiding false claims, misleading representations, or commercialization of hope.
- Distinguishing personal experience from broader trajectories of recovery.
- Rejecting and actively working to end practices that exploit vulnerable individuals, families or communities.
- Protecting recovery from distortion for personal, financial, political, or ideological gain.

II. Responsibility to Protect Those Who Are Vulnerable: *We affirm our responsibility to safeguard those seeking recovery, particularly those who are most marginalized and easy prey for opportunists. As has occurred over the course of history, those seeking recovery entrust us with their hope. That trust must never be violated. This may include:*

- Recognizing the inherent vulnerability present in early recovery and responding with humility and care.
- Prioritizing the welfare of individuals, families and communities over personal or organizational gain.
- Guiding those seeking recovery towards accountable, ethical, evidence and practice informed supports.
- Refusing to participate in or remain silent about exploitative or harmful practices that impact any of us.

III. Responsibility to Serve the Recovery Commons: *We affirm our responsibility to contribute to the strength, sustainability, and accessibility of recovery for others. We recognize that we are beneficiaries of a commons we did not build alone, and we accept responsibility to help sustain it. This may include:*

- Giving back through service, mentorship, advocacy, or stewardship when able.
- Supporting recovery institutions, communities, and traditions that sustain healing.
- Strengthening, rather than fragmenting, the unity of the recovery movement.
- Acting with humility, recognizing that recovery is sustained through collective effort.

IV. Responsibility to Future Generations: *We affirm our responsibility to preserve and expand recovery opportunities for those who come after us. We serve not only those beside us, but those we will never meet. This may include:*

- Protecting access to supports, services, and all effective recovery pathways.
- Challenging stigma, discrimination, and structural barriers for all forms of recovery in its diversity of trajectories.
- Ensuring recovery remains accessible across all of our communities and populations.
- Acting with long-term vision, recognizing that our actions shape the recovery landscape future generations will depend on.

V. Responsibility to Uphold Truths, Science, and Lived Experience: *We affirm our responsibility to honor all ways of knowing. Including academic knowledge, experiential knowledge and beyond as essential and complementary sources of truth. Recovery is strengthened by humility, curiosity, and respect for many truths. This may include:*

- Supporting ethical research, evaluation, and transparent investigations coproduced and beneficial to our communities.
- Ever remaining open to learning, growth, and new understanding as our knowledge bases evolves.
- Avoiding ideological rigidity or claims of absolute authority as hallmarks of our collective efforts.
- Respecting the diversity of recovery pathways and experiences across all communities.

VI. Responsibility to Practice Ethical Stewardship in Positions of Leadership and Influence: *We affirm that leadership within the recovery movement is a form of stewardship, not ownership. Everyone is a leader, no one is a leader.*

Leadership in recovery is measured by service, not status. This may include:

- Acting as custodians of a shared mission, not sages or proprietors of personal platforms or agendas.
- Avoiding self-promotion as it undermines our collective trust and unity.
- Using our influence to elevate others and strengthen the commons rather than for our own gain.
- Remaining accountable to the communities we serve.

VII. Responsibility to Protect the Unity and Credibility of the Recovery Movement: *We affirm our responsibility to act in ways that strengthen, rather than erode, the collective credibility and effectiveness of recovery advocacy. We understand that we represent something larger than ourselves. This may include:*

- Acting with integrity in all of our public and private roles.
- Avoiding any and all actions that erode public trust in recovery.
- Promoting our unity while respecting diversity of pathways and differing perspectives.
- Recognizing that our individual actions can affect the broader recovery community and acting in accordance.

VIII. Responsibility to Bear Witness and Carry the Message Forward: *We affirm our responsibility to ensure that recovery remains visible, accessible, and probable for others. We do this because others once did this for us, even at times long before we were born. This may include:*

- Offering hope through example, service, and presence.
- Challenging bias, discrimination and misinformation when encountered.
- Helping others find recovery when they seek it in ways that benefit them.
- Ensuring that recovery remains a living, accessible reality within all of our communities.

Conclusion: Stewardship of a Living Commons:

Recovery is a gift, yet perhaps even more so it is an inheritance and a responsibility to protect and nurture. The responsibility to sustain recovery transmission belongs to each and every one of us. We are the beneficiaries of hundreds of years of recovery commons built through courage, sacrifice, and service, often against what seemed at the time as overwhelming odds.

We are [the little engine that could](#). Our very future depends upon our willingness to act not only as recipients, proprietors or rock stars but as stewards. If we accept these responsibilities, recovery will remain strong, credible, and accessible to those who need it most. If we neglect them, movement integrity and accessibility will likely erode. The question is not whether this responsibility exists. The question is whether we will accept it.

Ending and Open Questions:

- *What would you put on a list of responsibilities to consider?*
- *If it is not our responsibility to tend these fields, then who?*
- *If we do not stay unified, that is grounded in a common sense of our responsibility to each other and the greater good, how can we move things forward?*
- *What if anything do we owe those who came before us and for those who come after us?*

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Post link March 14, 2026 - [HERE](#)

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