Dear Susan,

As we discussed in our phone meeting, we have been working remotely and have been very busy with urgent and immediate needs and adjustments to our program brought on by the pandemic and ensuing economic crisis. As the scope and intensity of our work has changed, we have reflected on what will be the most effective structure of our program in meeting the needs of older adult exonerated death row survivors. We are proposing a Plan B for how we can redirect the funds to achieve our goals.

Our original budget called for $22,500 to hire a part-time social worker who would be dedicated to working with the older adult members who make up about ½ of our membership. The other $2500 of our budget was dedicated to increasing Peer Specialist hours to meet the growing needs of our aging population. The pace of the growing needs of our members escalated along with the pandemic and economic crisis and our work changed very quickly. We have not had the time and resources needed to move forward with a new hire (the part-time social worker), nor does it seem the best option right now as the needs of our population are so unique and would be served best if the person could train in-person.

That said, we think there is a silver lining. As we have worked to keep up with the changes, one of WTI’s Peer Specialists in particular has been especially engaged in assisting his fellow older adult exonerees and helping them connect to resources.  His work has been crucial in managing the increasing caseload for the social work team during the crisis, he is an impacted member of the community both as an exoneree and as an older adult, and has in-depth understanding of the needs of those we serve. As our longest-serving Peer Specialist, he is experienced with the work and enthusiastic about developing further social work skills.

We are proposing that we shift the budget to use $20,000 to increase his time for the remainder of the year so that he will work approximately ¾ time or 30 hours/week (he currently works 1/3 time). The remaining $5000 of the funds would be used for technology and training. In his role as Peer Specialist he would take on the specialty we originally envisioned for a part-time social worker, dedicated to identifying and developing resources for and managing needs of Older Adult Exonerees and tracking data, under the guidance of the Director of Social Work. To support the expanded role, we are currently considering whether Peer Specialist certification for the State of Alabama, where he is located, would be an appropriate course. Other options would be individual webinars from the American Society on Aging, the Gerontological Society of America, or professional Social Work organizations and schools such as the NASW, Boston University School of Social Work Center for Aging and Disability Education and Research, and the University of Arkansas Institute of Geriatric Social Work.  The position will be supported, trained, and supervised by Cara Kovalovich, Director of Social Work.

We are excited about this model as it is in keeping with our efforts to continue to uplift exoneree leadership and peer support in our organization. Surviving death row is a unique experience and presents additional challenges to the aging process, including issues with trust that our Peer Specialists can overcome in ways that most others cannot. Since we submitted our original proposal, we did receive approval for funding from another source that has provided a small increase in hours for each of the Peer Specialists. We can see how even that small increase has made a difference for the exonerated death row survivors that we serve. This shift would also enhance the localization of our services –when we considered hiring a part time social worker, we hoped to hire someone in a different geographic area from our Philadelphia home office, preferable in the South where many exonerees are located. We envision this not as a temporary solution in response to the pandemic, but as a positive, sustainable approach to our program. We will evaluate this approach at the end of the fiscal year with an intention to continue the Older Adult Peer Specialty and hopefully move to 100% full time. We believe we can develop a model that will be useful to other organizations led by impacted people and that serve older adults whose lives have been impacted by the criminal legal system.

Cara and I are happy to answer any questions you or the board may have. If this is amenable to you, we are ready to begin right away. We very much appreciate your support and guidance, and any thoughts you may have.

With gratitude,

Tricia, Cara and Kirk 9.14.20