

Testimony in Support of SB990
Public Health – Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program

To: Delores Kelley, Chair, Senate Finance Committee

From: Rev. James Muratore, Pastor, St. Luke's Church on the Avenue, Baltimore

Date: March 10, 2020

In March of 2018, St. Luke's Church on the Avenue in the Hampden neighborhood of Baltimore became Baltimore City Health Department's first fixed site for Syringe Exchange Services. Over these two years of delving into the work of harm reduction, members of the congregation and the community have had the privilege to forge deeper relationships with our neighbors who use drugs by providing hospitality for participants during the exchange's operating hours. It is because of this experience that with the affirmation of the members of St. Luke's Church on the Avenue, I support HB464 to create safe spaces where individuals are engaged without judgment and essential services and resources are provided to this vulnerable population of our neighbors, family, and friends.

It is important to note the church's location directly adjacent to row homes, just four doors away from Hampden Elementary-Middle School, and situated on the corner of West 36th Street, the main thoroughfare of this small urban community. Initially, our immediate neighbors were concerned of droves of people from all over the city lining up outside the church to obtain clean syringes ultimately interfering with children's arrival and departure from school. The reality, however, is far different. Averaging 15 participants during our weekly morning program, the small operation welcomes clients into the church hall for coffee, refreshments, and lunch, as well as additional services provided by other community partners. Only a handful of the near 100 total clients were from other areas and only came because they missed their usual exchange for one reason or another. As a result, some of our most oppositional neighbors have come around to appreciate what is happening here, especially after learning that many of the participants are parents of Hampden Elementary-Middle School students.

Over these two years, I have been witness to tangible change for several individuals whom I have come to know and love. Several participants have moved on to Suboxone or Methadone Treatment, but still come to the program to socialize with the staff, volunteers, and participants over lunch. Some have begun volunteering at the church, helping out in simple ways with the thrift store or general maintenance. Most notable is the verbal recognition from participants that there is a place where they feel respected and cared about, for which they feel a sense of positive community.

The culture emerging in our church is one of radical hospitality and we are realistic about what that means and the challenges that come along with it. For example, one individual, who is homeless, uses the church's restroom throughout the week. I am certain there are times this person uses drugs while in the restroom and, therefore, I check in on their status after a few minutes and make sure my Naloxone is accessible should administration be required. Fortunately, I have never had to use it. If I did need to administer it, however, I could. And that is the difference between life and death. There are things that we cannot control as a community and there are things that we can. Until we allow individuals to come out from the dark corners of the alleys, under the overpasses, or recesses of parks, then the fault of every fatal overdose is our own.