

House Health and Government Operations Committee

**Testimony in SUPPORT of House Bill 464
Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program
February 28, 2020**

TO: Delegate Pendergrass, Chair, Delegate Peña-Melnyk, Vice Chair, and other members of the House Health and Government Operations Committee

FROM: Allison Berkowitz, on behalf of the NASW-MD Chapter

In my time as a substance abuse counselor and harm reduction advocate, I have had the good fortune of seeing clients quit substance use through mainstream methods (that is to say “cold turkey” and with the aid of 12-step programs.) While I have been thrilled each time a client successfully recovered this way, there have been many more where clients who could not - or would not, for a variety of reasons - be able to stop using substances all at once. In those cases, without intervention, I have seen clients and families suffer, fall through the cracks, and die prematurely. Just because a person is using substances does not mean their life is not of value. As social workers, we help meet the needs of – and empower – all people, with particular attention to those who are vulnerable, oppressed, and in poverty¹. Unfortunately, we are living in a precarious time where a great deal of people fall into these categories. With income inequality greater than any time since before the great depression, many people are dying from what are referred to as “diseases of despair,” including from substances². Those people are worthy of help.

In addition to being efficacious (studies have found Overdose Prevention Sites [OPS’] to reduce the number of overdose deaths and transmission rates of infectious diseases without increasing drug trafficking or crime in the relevant areas³), these sites are in demand. A Johns Hopkins study last year found that 77% of those surveyed, including those in Baltimore, said they would use such sites if they were available⁴. No one likes the idea of excessive drug use, but what about the idea of preventable deaths? What about all the tax dollars we spend treating overdoses? Safe consumption sites have been shown to save lives and tax dollars. Additionally, for substance users who want to seek help, a life of substance use is often not conducive to our Western model of health care. That is another perk of OPS’. While yes, people are going there to consume substances safely, they can also get some immediate health assistance, such as getting wound care. They can

¹ <https://www.socialworkers.org/about/ethics/code-of-ethics/code-of-ethics-english>

² <https://blog.petrieflom.law.harvard.edu/2018/07/22/diseases-of-despair-the-role-of-policy-and-law/>

³ <https://www.ama-assn.org/press-center/press-releases/ama-wants-new-approaches-combat-synthetic-and-injectable-drugs>

⁴ <http://www.baltimoresun.com/health/bs-hs-safe-consumption-spaces-20190605-story.html>

often also get referrals to help in the community. It is with all this in mind that, on behalf of NASW-MD, **I fervently support HB 464, and urge each of you to give it a favorable report.** Thank you.

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Legislative Committee

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