

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB0720:

Criminal Law- Drug Paraphernalia for Administration - Decriminalization

TO: Hon. Luke Clippinger, Chair, and members of the House Judiciary Committee

FROM: Sarah Kattakuzhy, MD

DATE: February 17, 2020

My name is Sarah Kattakuzhy, and I am a physician at the Institute of Human Virology at the University of Maryland School of Medicine, where I specialize in the overlap of infectious disease and substance use disorder. I am writing to provide my unequivocal support for House Bill 0720. This bill would reduce disease transmission and harms associated with drug use, and would improve safety on an individual and community level.

I am writing from my unique perspective as both a scientist researching hepatitis C in people with opioid use disorder, and as a clinician providing care to this vulnerable population. Simply put, decriminalization of drug paraphernalia is a public health measure to improve the safety and health of both individuals who use drugs, and the larger population. While clean needles and syringes are the cornerstone of infection prevention, they are not enough. Several pathogens, including hepatitis C, can survive on surfaces outside of the human body for up to one week, and can be transmitted through non-injecting paraphernalia including cookers, cottons, water, tourniquet, and straws.

In order to stop the transmission of these infectious diseases, individuals who use drugs must: (1) have access to unused drug use paraphernalia; (2) be allowed to carry this equipment; and (3) be able to dispose of this equipment in appropriate containers. These steps would reduce disease transmission without increasing drug use, and would reduce community burden of improperly discarded drug use paraphernalia.

While many health departments, non-profit organizations, and syringe exchange programs dispense and collect non-injecting equipment, current paraphernalia laws make it impossible for individuals to accept, carry, utilize, and dispose of such equipment without the risk of arrest or fines. I believe that we are asking individuals who use drugs – your constituents -- to make an impossible choice: protect yourself and be jailed, or use whatever is available. With these options, it is no wonder that so many of my patients are forced into the latter, and live with the consequences.

I recognize that some opponents may raise a third option – don't use at all. But I can tell you what I've witnessed with my own eyes, and what is backed by decades of research: in the setting of a chronic, unremitting disease, for many, there is no other choice. Without full decriminalization of drug paraphernalia, we will continue to stigmatize people who use drugs, and we will further drive infectious complications of opioid use disorder. On this issue, science, common sense, and human rights have consensus: full decriminalization of drug use paraphernalia.

I respectfully urge the Judiciary Committee to rule in favor of drug paraphernalia decriminalization, to improve the health and safety of all Marylanders.

Sincerely,



Sarah Kattakuzhy, MD

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