

HEALTH CARE FOR THE HOMELESS TESTIMONY
FAVORABLE WITH SPONSOR AMENDMENT
HB 481 – Drug Paraphernalia for Administration – Decriminalization

House Judiciary Committee
February 15, 2022



Health Care for the Homeless supports HB 481 with the sponsor’s amendment to make the bills match the way the bill was passed last session. The amendments decriminalize the delivery or sale of paraphernalia because secondary distribution is a critical tactic in health care delivery, whether it’s drug paraphernalia to at-home COVID-19 testing kits.

HB 481 will save lives, reduce barriers to housing and employment, and prevent the spread of infectious diseases. As a health care facility serving over 10,000 of Maryland’s most vulnerable individuals each year, we see far too often the effects of criminalizing substance use. In Maryland, possession of drug paraphernalia can result in a fine up to \$500 and a misdemeanor – leading to a criminal record that can be used to deny someone housing and employment.¹ Without access to stable housing, it is unfathomable to expect an individual to succeed in treatment for substance use disorders. The criminalization of substance use and paraphernalia perpetuates homelessness and prevents individuals from seeking supportive services. When there is less fear or punishment or arrest by police, individuals feel safer accessing treatment.² By decriminalizing paraphernalia and implementing harm reduction principles, individuals are more inclined to carry and use life-saving supplies—such as sterile needles and safer smoking kits—that prevent overdose deaths and the spread of infectious diseases.³ In addition to saving lives, this has enormous implications for lowering healthcare costs related to treating infectious diseases, like HIV.⁴

In Maryland, there were 515 opioid-related deaths between January and March 2019.⁵ That is far too many. This bill would show Maryland’s commitment to reframing the way we view and treat substance use—as a public health issue, not a criminal one. **As a health clinic that sees how crucial and life-saving harm reduction and decriminalization are for the clients we serve, Health Care for the Homeless urges the committee to issue a favorable report on HB 481 with the sponsor’s amendment. We thank you for taking this action last year.**

Health Care for the Homeless is Maryland’s leading provider of integrated health services and supportive housing for individuals and families experiencing homelessness. We work to prevent and end homelessness for vulnerable individuals and families by providing quality, integrated health care and promoting access to affordable housing and sustainable incomes through direct service, advocacy, and community engagement. We deliver integrated medical care, mental health services, state-certified addiction treatment, dental care, social services, and housing support services for over 10,000 Marylanders annually at sites in Baltimore City and Baltimore County. For more information, visit www.hchmd.org.

¹ MD Code Ann., Crim. Law, § 5-619 (2013).

² Laura Vearrier, “The Value of Harm Reduction for Injection Drug Use: A Clinical and Public Health Ethics Analysis,” *Disease-a-Month* 65, no. 5 (May 2019), pp. 119–41, available at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.disamonth.2018.12.002>.

³ *Id.*

⁴ David Wilson, et al., “The cost-effectiveness of harm reduction,” *International Journal of Drug Policy* 26, supp. 1 (February 2015), pp. S5-S11, available at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2014.11.007>.

⁵ Maryland Department of Health, *State Releases 2019 First Quarter Fatal Overdose Data* (June 2019), available at health.maryland.gov/newsroom/Pages/State-Releases-2019-First-Quarter-Fatal-Overdose-Data.aspx.