



March 8, 2022

The Honorable Luke Clippinger
Chairman, House Judiciary Committee
Room 101, House Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

House Bill 1058 - Justice and Public Health Prioritization Council - FAVORABLE

Dear Chair Clippinger and House Judiciary Committee members,

Baltimore Harm Reduction Coalition (BHRC) is an advocacy organization that mobilizes community members for the health, dignity, and safety of people targeted by the war on drugs and anti-sex worker policies. As a certified Overdose Response Program, Naloxone distributor, and syringe service program, we have provided essential health care services across the state for years. To supplement the life-saving services provided by us and dozens of harm reduction programs across the state, BHRC supports House Bill 1058 (Justice and Public Health Prioritization Council).

The criminal justice approach to drug use, possession and distribution is a crisis to our public health and humanity. Over 145 years of criminalizing people who use drugs has devastated communities across the country. **BHRC supports HB1058 and all efforts to move Maryland towards community reparation from over a century of harm, and freedom from criminalization.** Maryland must prioritize the health, dignity, and safety of people who use drugs, including systemic community healing after decades of over-policing and mass incarceration due to the war on drugs.

An aspect of being targeted by the racist drug war is that our community and loved ones are also facing an increasingly deadly overdose epidemic. During 2020, as the deadly COVID-19 pandemic flooded the U.S., drug and alcohol related intoxication deaths in Maryland reached a staggering 2,799 fatalities. Overdose fatalities have steadily increased among Black Marylanders since 2012, increasing 16% from 2019-2020.¹ The rate of overdose among Black Marylanders in 2020 mirrors national trends, as Black overdose rates overtook White for the first time since the 1990's.²

Maryland legislators have taken laudable steps to reduce the devastation of the overdose crisis, but they do not go far enough to halt the overdose epidemic. The General Assembly has approved measures to expand access to the life-saving medication naloxone, increase behavioral health treatment, and establish syringe services programs throughout the state. While these essential policies have increased opportunities for health and safety, the situation remains dire.

¹ Maryland Department of Health (June 2021). Unintentional Drug- and Alcohol-Related Intoxication Deaths* in Maryland 2020 Annual Report.

² Friedman JR, Hansen H. Evaluation of Increases in Drug Overdose Mortality Rates in the US by Race and Ethnicity Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic. JAMA Psychiatry. Published online March 02, 2022. doi:10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2022.0004

In the midst of multiple intersecting public health crises, Marylanders must collaboratively develop concrete, health-centered recommendations that reduce the scope of our carceral system and reinvest in communities. We ask that the Judiciary Committee give HB1058 a favorable report.

For more information about Baltimore Harm Reduction Coalition or our position, please contact our Director of Mobilization, Rajani Gudlavalleti at rajani@baltimoreharmreduction.org