



**Testimony in Favor of House Bill 481 - Drug Paraphernalia for Administration -
Decriminalization, with sponsor amendment**

TO: Chair Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher, and Members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee

FROM: Thomas Higdon, on behalf of The People's Commission to Decriminalize Maryland

My name is Thomas Higdon, I live in Reisterstown in the 10th district, and I am the Chair of the Drug Policy work group for The People's Commission to Decriminalize Maryland. I submit this testimony on behalf of The People's Commission to Decriminalize Maryland, and in favor of House Bill 481.

As a member of The People's Commission and a person in recovery I have both experienced Maryland drug policy and continue to be concerned about how my legislature addresses drug policy in my community. The "War on Drugs" has always been a war on people. No matter if the intent was ever to help those who use, drug policy has always hurt, and it has disproportionately targeted Black communities and lower-income communities. Finally, this bill gives you the legislators the opportunity to decriminalize people who use drugs and opens the door for investment in community support. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted all markets, including traditional systems of care and the illicit drug market. People who use drugs have had a more difficult time accessing support all while facing economic disaster and an increasingly adulterated drug supply, which is reflected in increasing overdose fatalities. Maryland must divest from a carceral approach to drug use and invest in harm reduction and community mutual aid to keep people alive and build systems of care that are non-judgmental and person-centered.

Not only does the overreliance on a carceral solution to a health crisis serve a role in producing conditions of "social determinants of *ill* health", but criminalization also creates barriers in accessing harm reduction services. The ongoing removal and return of community residents from correctional institutions destabilizes already disadvantaged neighborhoods. And while these are my opinions as a person who has experienced this system and as an advocate for change, they are also backed by extensive research and data from the World Health Organization, The American Public Health Association, and researchers from universities across this country. The just thing to do, the action that would best serve the health of our community, would be to take this first step and decriminalize paraphernalia.

We urge a favorable repost on House Bill 481, with sponsor amendment.