



FAVORABLE – SB 0279: Public Health – Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program

Senate Finance Committee, January 26, 2021

Testimony from Staff at the Youth Empowered Society (YES Drop-In Center)

Founded by formerly homeless youth and their allies, the YES Drop-In Center is Baltimore City's only drop-in center for youth experiencing homelessness, working to end homelessness through direct-service provision, youth leadership, and engaging in other systems-level reform. We work with youth, ages 14 to 25, by providing them services to sustainably grow in a dignified, supportive, and safe space. Our team provides, in a broad sense, drop-in services and case management, employment services and job readiness training, housing connections, and leadership opportunities. YES is also an overdose response program (ORP); we became an ORP through the Maryland State Department of Health, which allows us to distribute naloxone to our youth and their networks, a critical tool and intervention in treating substance use as a public health issue. Overdose Prevention Sites (OPS) are an extension of this harm reduction movement, one rooted in social justice and dignity. We write to express our support for SB 279, which will authorize the establishment of Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Programs by community-based organizations. We believe that OPS are another critical tool needed to allow for the safe consumption of substances, and can help connect people to much-needed, life-saving resources.

At YES, we fundamentally believe in harm reduction and trauma-informed practices, as core principles, rooted in the SELF Sanctuary Model. We strive to carry this into our work, to make YES as safe, accessible, and dignified for the youth we work with—an emphasis on *with*. Overdose Prevention Sites are physical and figurative testaments to how harm reduction and trauma-informed care can work; they allow for people to safely consume substances, in a safe and supportive environment where they can get connected to services if they need to. OPS can be integrated into some existing services, expanding the possibilities for how to best serve individuals. They are a proven, effective, safe, and cost-effective service, one rooted in treating the racist war on drugs as a systems-level, public health issue, rather than shifting the blame of substance use on the individual. They are a socially-just intervention. Notably, OPS are established safe spaces that are not centered on stripping the dignity away from people who use; on the contrary; OPS allow for people who use to lead dignified and healthy lives, and to get connected to much needed services.

YES has had several youth from our community pass away from overdose. The loss of life to overdose was, and still is, traumatizing. Those loved ones lost to overdose are not forgotten. How different would our drop-in center be, how different would our city be, if there were established sites where people who use had access to life-saving tools? To dignified treatment? To respectful practitioners who could support them, before, during, and after their use? This isn't a conceptual dream, or theoretical afterthought; there are very real, dangerous, and traumatizing consequences around what happens when people use without supports. Without the presence of overdose prevention tools like naloxone. Without the presence of people committed to acknowledging all human life as valuable. As an ORP, we have seen the direct benefits of distributing naloxone to youth in our community. OPS can vastly expand those benefits, and directly save human lives; that should be enough to turn this idea into a tangible, and influential, reality.

There are literal lives at stake. Please support SB 279 to authorize the establishment of Overdose and Infections Disease Prevention Services Programs in our communities.