

Good afternoon members of the Senate and fellow Marylanders, my name is Gassoh Goba, a resident of Baltimore City and former Chapter Lead of Sex Workers Outreach Project (SWOP), an all volunteer organization championing the human and civil rights of people in the sex trade.

I'm urging you to pass SB0279, so people who use drugs and harm reductionists can continue the work of dismantling the internal and external damages wrought by the racists and classist War on Drugs - legally and safely.

Many harm reductionists and peers today will uplift the various safety, financial and public health benefits that legalizing Overdose Prevention Sites will garner so, I will highlight the importance of this bill to adults living with childhood and adult trauma wounds.

Adverse Childhood Experiences, a term coined in 1995, is a subset of childhood adversities typified by abuse, neglect and household dysfunction which children and adults who score highly have an increased likelihood of experiencing health issues ranging from substance abuse, suicidal attempts, depression, missed work and poor academic achievement.

Countless studies have been published by the Center of Disease Control, the National Library of Medicine or Harvard University's Center for the Developing Child that highlight the insidious ways prolonged, toxic stress negatively impacts the molecular biology of developing children and adults, further widening the chasm of community and health disparities experienced by communities burdened by such traumas.

Communities disproportionately made up of black and brown, immigrants and indigenous peoples who are working poor, disabled, queer, young, houseless or formerly incarcerated - made to suffer the yolk of systems and policies that have yet to be repatriated.

As an organizer with SWOP Baltimore, I have connected with dozens of people who use drugs and sell sex in the streets of Baltimore City; many of the people I met during those times shared experiences of childhood and adult trauma, citing this pain as reasons why they use - as a balm for the pain.

I will never forget one woman in particular who frustratingly expressed "how do they expect me to heal 50 years of trauma and pain in a 90 day program"?

The reality for many people who use drugs in Maryland is that they are not ready to stop using and, by forcing paternalistic services and programs that do not recognize the extent of trauma, we are again failing residents and the generations of peoples who have passed who also struggled to carry the yolk of multiple oppressions, childhood and adult trauma.

As we move away from the shadow of the Trump presidency and the potential promise of Biden's administration, I urge you, be unafraid of innovation and creative solutions; cultivate compassion and empathy for residents who are falsely seen as "lost or wasted souls".

I am urging you to not only see but invest in the humanity of people who use drugs, in Overdose Prevention Sites that will be a bridge of connectivity, supporting Marylanders to chart their own healing journey with peers, medical professionals and trauma-informed personnel; to support the creation of spaces, like OPS's, where people who drugs can safely begin unpacking layers of pain within a continuum of care that will not disparage them for using drugs or abandon them for healing at their own pace.

Let 2021 finally be the year we move towards building systems of freedom instead of oppression; building tools of connection instead of isolation; fostering hope instead of despair.

Let 2021 be the year Maryland legalizes Overdose Prevention Sites and witness the powerful healing connection can play in our communities - thank you.