

Senate Finance Committee

**Testimony in SUPPORT of Senate Bill 279
Public Health – Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program
January 26, 2021**

Maryland’s Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW – MD), which represents professional social workers across the state, supports Senate Bill 279 – Public Health – Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program. The State of Maryland just released new data showing a 12% increase in overdose deaths in Maryland¹. This crisis which has been with us for years has been overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the isolation, unemployment, and depression that have boomed with the pandemic, addiction has thrived to a deadly degree. Maryland must embrace harm reduction strategies in response. The creation of Overdose Prevention Sites is a proven effective way to reduce deaths.

Social workers play a significant role in the substance use disorder treatment community. They see clients begin and maintain recovery through finding treatment, sometimes with the use of medication, sometimes including peer support with the aid of 12-step programs. They also see people who cannot, or choose not, to stop using substances all at once. In those cases, without intervention, clients and their families suffer, fall through the cracks, and die prematurely. Just because a person is using substances does not mean their life is not of value. Social workers help meet the needs of – and empower – all people, with particular attention to those who are vulnerable, oppressed, and in poverty². Unfortunately, with income inequality greater than any time since before the great depression, many people are dying from what are referred to as “diseases of despair,” including from substances³. Those people are worthy of help.

Overdose Prevention Sites (OPSs) are efficacious, with numerous studies having found they reduce the number of overdose deaths and transmission rates of infectious diseases without increasing drug trafficking or crime in the relevant areas⁴. In addition, these sites are in demand. A Johns Hopkins 2019 study found that 77% of those surveyed, including those in Baltimore, said they would use such sites if they were available. OPSs have been shown to save lives and tax dollars⁵.

(over)

¹ <https://beforeitstoolate.maryland.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/34/2021/01/Third-Quarter-OOCC-Report-2020-FINAL.pdf>

² <https://www.socialworkers.org/about/ethics/code-of-ethics/code-of-ethics-english>

³ <https://blog.petrieflom.law.harvard.edu/2018/07/22/diseases-of-despair-the-role-of-policy-and-law/>

⁴ <https://www.ama-assn.org/press-center/press-releases/ama-wants-new-approaches-combat-synthetic-and-injectable-drugs>

⁵ <http://www.baltimoresun.com/health/bs-hs-safe-consumption-spaces-20190605-story.html>

Additionally, for people who use substances who want to seek help, our traditional health care system does not always present an effective and welcoming place. OPSs accept people where they are, provide a safe place where people use substances that they would use somewhere else at higher risk of death, get some immediate health assistance for things such as wound care, and get referrals to various support services and treatment.

It is with all this in mind that NASW-MD supports SB 279 and urges a favorable report.

Respectfully,

Daphne McClellan, Ph.D., MSW
Executive Director, NASW-MD