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SB 279

Public Health – Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program

Hearing of the Senate Finance Committee

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1:00pm

SUPPORT

The Public Justice Center (PJC) is a not-for-profit civil rights and anti-poverty legal services organization which seeks to advance social justice, economic and racial equity, and fundamental human rights in Maryland. Our Health Rights Project supports policies and practices that promote the overall health of Marylanders struggling to make ends meet, with the explicit goal of promoting strategies that work to eliminate racial and ethnic disparities in health outcomes. PJC strongly supports SB 279 which would establish an Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program administered by community-based organizations to provide overdose prevention sites. It would also require that the Maryland Department of Health develop these sites in urban, suburban and rural areas.

Maryland is still facing an opioid epidemic, and the number of deaths has continued to rise over the last several years. According to the Maryland Behavioral Health Administration, the number of opioid-related deaths increased by 7% between 2017 and 2018.¹ Fentanyl-related deaths have increased dramatically since 2013 among most age groups.² Maryland also has high Hepatitis C infection rates, a disease that kills more Americans than any other infectious disease and disproportionately impacts African Americans.³ Further, injection drug use is currently the most common means of Hepatitis C transmission.⁴ Research supports that stigma against people living with substance use disorders can limit the willingness of individuals to seek treatment.⁵ It is critical that individuals with substance use disorders not

¹ Maryland Department of Health, *Drug and Alcohol-Related Intoxication Death in Maryland* (2018), https://bha.health.maryland.gov/Documents/Annual_2018_Drug_Intox_Report.pdf.

² *Id.*

³ Francis Collins, Hepatitis C Disparities among African Americans (2017), <https://www.hhs.gov/hepatitis/blog/2017/02/27/hepatitis-c-disparities-among-african-americans.html>.

⁴ Kathleen N. Ly, et. al., *Rising Mortality Associated with Hepatitis C Virus in the United States, 2003-2013* (2016), <https://academic.oup.com/cid/article/62/10/1287/2462772>.

⁵ Lawrence Yang, et. al., *Stigma and Substance Use Disorders: An Internal Phenomenon* (September 1, 2018), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5854406/>.

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only be provided immediate access to Naloxone/Narcan (overdose reversal drug), but also access to drug treatment, education and peer support to recover from addiction.

SB 279, if passed, would create access to Overdose Prevention Sites (OPS) which are revolutionary, holistic tools aimed at reducing overdose deaths, HIV and Hepatitis C infections and stigma against individuals with substance use disorders. By providing access to sterile needles to individuals who use injectable drugs, Maryland could significantly reduce the rate of HIV and Hepatitis C infections. OPS would also offer testing for HIV, Hepatitis C and sexually transmitted infections and referrals for treatment, allowing individuals who have contracted these infections to be promptly connected to care. It is time for Maryland to invest in OPS as a strategy to help end the opioid epidemic and connect individuals with substance use disorders to quality and compassionate care.

For these reasons, the Public Justice Center urges the committee to issue a **FAVORABLE** report for **SB 279**. If you have any questions, please contact Ashley Black at 410-625-9409 x 224 or blacka@publicjustice.org.