

I'm here today to request your ear as citizens, from a concerned citizen, about our state's current way of criminalizing people who use drugs and urging the decriminalization of drug paraphernalia.

Formerly as an epidemiologist at the Baltimore City Health Department, I was trained at Johns Hopkins and I currently work on research projects at the School of Social Work at University of Maryland. I am here to testify for the HB 372. From a personal and professional experience, I have seen firsthand that an environment of drug criminalization not only marks someone with a criminal record, but also prevents someone from the full and unfettered access to life saving public health interventions, like syringe service programs and naloxone distribution efforts.

Research in Maryland has brought this to light. In one Baltimore health study, among more than 300 people who injected drugs reported an aversion to carrying syringes and attending legally authorized Syringe Services Programs (SSP) in fear of arrest; all increasing the risk of HIV and Hepatitis C transmission and mitigating the public's investment in community harm reduction programs. Another Baltimore study found that experiences of police violence was associated with drug paraphernalia confiscation and receptive syringe sharing; directly implicating the transmission of infectious diseases. Although there is immunity against carrying drug paraphernalia if you have proof of being a SSP recipient, too many people do not have their card on hand, do not have access to the service, have another person access the services for them or just simply do not even know their rights. Given these realities, so many people are arrested on drug paraphernalia charges that are ultimately dismissed, disrupting people's lives and access to life saving services, and eroding trust in government systems. It is not enough to provide paraphernalia immunity on only one condition.

We must repair the harm of criminalizing drug use. This is just one simple step to move forward. I urge you to sign on.

Thank you,

Natalie Flath, MPH

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#### References:

Flath et al 2017. <https://www-tandfonline-com.proxy-hs.researchport.umd.edu/doi/abs/10.1080/10826084.2016.1268630>  
Park et al 2019. <https://www-sciencedirect-com.proxy-hs.researchport.umd.edu/science/article/pii/S0955395918303062>