



House Bill 794 - Public Health - Opioid Restitution Fund Advisory Council
Appropriations and Health and Government Operations Committee
March 1, 2022

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT

I am Jennifer Tuerke, Executive Director of Voices of Hope, a peer-run 501(c)3 nonprofit organization established in 2013. I also am a person in long-term recovery. Voices of Hope (VoH) is a recovery community organization that provides treatment and recovery support for people and families with substance use disorder (drug addiction). VoH also provides harm reduction services, assistance with recovery/sober living housing, and a variety of evidence-based peer training and support services in Harford and Cecil counties.

With last week's \$28 billion settlement against Johnson & Johnson and three major distributors, the timing for passing HB 794 is perfect. In addition to Maryland's state share of the settlement, several local governments in areas that VOH serves will receive funds, specifically Harford and Cecil counties and the cities of Aberdeen, Bel Air, Havre de Grace, North East, and Perryville. It is no secret that the drug addiction epidemic is becoming more severe. The number of overdoses is increasing as fentanyl, counterfeit prescription pills, and deadly drug analogs are more widespread. The need for quality, accessible behavioral health services for people with substance use disorder (SUD), mental health disorder (MHD), and co-occurring disorders (a combination of SUD and MHD) is greater than ever...in Cecil and Harford counties and throughout Maryland. In 2021, VoH's peer recovery specialists saw a 527% increase in our number of services/engagements to Cecil and Harford counties' residents-- from 1,674 in 2020 to 8,821 in 2021. Our harm reduction services (Narcan to reverse overdoses, HIV prevention, a safe syringe services) increased from 8,873 contacts in 2020 to 12,455 in 2021.

While VoH supports all the provisions of HB 794 that require that the Council to have people in recovery and others with family experience with SUDs. We support the provisions of HB 794 that recognize harm reduction, peer support specialists, and the need for crisis beds and residential treatment services for adults and minors. We applaud the Council's commitment to funding evidence-based, best practices.

As the House Committees and subsequently the Council decide how to award the settlement funds, we ask that the comments from Joe Rice, one of the lead attorneys for the plaintiffs, said after the trial.

"We're never going to have enough money to immediately cure this problem. What we're trying to do is give a lot of small communities a chance to try and change some of their problems."

VoH and other comparatively small nonprofit community-based organizations like Addiction Connections Resource in Harford County are "closest-to-the-people-being-served." People in active, often chaotic, addiction come to our recovery community services before they go to a hospital, urgent care center, or county health department. With settlement funds, our peer-driven organizations can provide vital harm reduction services, help them navigate entry to detox and treatment, jumpstart funding for placement into recovery housing/sober living, and provide a wide variety support services for the people and families we serve every day.

As COVID transitions from an epidemic to an endemic, the opioid/drug epidemic worsens every month. Therefore, the passage and enactment of HB 794 is more crucial than ever. VoH urges the Committees to pass HB 794.

Jennifer Tuerke
Executive Director

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