

JOSELINE A. PEÑA-MELNYK

Legislative District 21
Prince George's and
Anne Arundel Counties

—
Chair

Health and Government
Operations Committee

—

Rules and Executive
Nominations Committee

Legislative Policy Committee



The Maryland House of Delegates

ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Annapolis Office

The Maryland House of Delegates
6 Bladen Street, Room 241
Annapolis, Maryland 21401
410-841-3502 · 301-858-3502
800-492-7122 Ext. 3502
Joseline.Pena.Melnyk@house.state.md.us

—
District Office

P. O. Box 1251
College Park, Maryland 20741-1251

March 7, 2023

House Bill 953 – Public Health – Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program

Testimony of Delegate Joseline A. Peña-Melnyk (Favorable)

Madam Vice Chair, and fellow members of the Health and Government Operations Committee, I am pleased to present House Bill (HB) 953, the Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program.

Since 2020, Maryland alone has lost nearly 7,500 lives to overdose. This includes every jurisdiction in Maryland. Maps provided by the Maryland Opioid Operational Command Center show over 1,800 meaningful lives were lost across our state in the first three quarters of 2022, of which over 80% involved fentanyl.¹

The overdose epidemic is a public health crisis, requiring public health solutions. I commend our committee and the Maryland General Assembly for passing laws to address this crisis - from expanding access to naloxone and medication-assisted treatment to authorizing syringe services programs (SSPs), and more.

And yet, people who use drugs continue to die preventable deaths. People are dying in back alleys, isolated and shut out from services. Increased access to naloxone is great, but it can only save a life if someone is there to administer it.

That is the reasoning behind overdose prevention sites (OPS): to provide a safe space for people who use drugs to consume the substances they already have and plan to use, in the presence of highly trained staff and access to naloxone and other life-saving interventions. In the event of an overdose, staff can act within seconds. Not a single person has ever died at one of these sites in the more than 40 years they have been operating across the world.²

In addition to keeping people alive, OPS provide access to medical care and behavioral health services. These sites can connect people, marginalized and discouraged from using other services, with needed health care. By meeting people where they are, treating them with dignity and respect, and building trusting relationships, OPS show people who use drugs and people with addictions that they matter.

¹ Maryland Overdose Data Dashboard. <https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/c546d22ec4a946cbb700a282f53c6eb7/>

² Transform Drug Policy Foundation. <https://transformdrugs.org/assets/files/PDFs/drug-consumption-rooms-briefing-2019.pdf>

There are nearly 200 sites operating in 14 countries.³ In the US, Rhode Island passed similar legislation in 2021⁴, and New York City began operating the first two sanctioned sites in 2021⁵. Our great state of Maryland can join them in doing more to prevent overdose deaths. HB 953 enables communities to access another tool to prevent overdoses and save lives.

To be clear, this bill is not a mandate. Rather, it would allow community organizations, approved by the Maryland Department of Health in consultation with local health departments, to create a pilot Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program. Pilot programs will not be in residential areas - and only a maximum of 6 programs can operate across the state. And to be very clear, these spaces will not provide drugs. We know drug use is happening, so these programs will provide a safe space for people to consume substances they already have with trained staff standing ready to assist if needed - rather than in isolation.

I understand that this approach may not sound intuitive, and I understand initial concerns. However, over 100 research studies have documented the benefits and cost-effectiveness of these sites. The first sanctioned site in Canada, which opened in 2003, saw increased use of detox programs and addiction treatment.^{6 7 8} They also did not see an increase in first time drug use.⁹ OPS also benefit communities by reducing public drug use and syringe litter.¹⁰ These are just a few benefits of OPS.

If we look back a few years, syringe services programs also seemed like a bold approach. But we now have 22 SSPs¹¹ operating in all regions across the state. We now have a new opportunity to take a bold, innovative step to save lives. We have lost too many Marylanders to overdose. I am confident that we all care deeply about preventing overdose deaths. Together, we can expand services for some of the most vulnerable members of our state - and save lives. I respectfully request a favorable report on HB 953.

³ Drug Policy Alliance. Overdose Prevention Centers. <https://drugpolicy.org/issues/supervised-consumption-services>

⁴ Rhode Island General Assembly. https://www.rilegislature.gov/pressrelease/_layouts/RIL.PressRelease.ListStructure/Forms/DisplayForm.aspx?List=c8baae31-3c10-431c-8dcd-9dbbe21ce3e9&ID=371925

⁵ OnPoint NYC. <https://onpointnyc.org/>

⁶ Wood et al (2006). Attendance at Supervised Injecting Facilities and Use of Detoxification Services. <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJM052939>

⁷ Wood et al (2007). Rate of detoxification service use and its impact among a cohort of supervised injecting facility users. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/17523986/>

⁸ DeBeck et al (2011). Injection drug use cessation and use of North America's first medically supervised safer injecting facility. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/20800976/>

⁹ Kerr et al (2007). Circumstances of First Injection Among Illicit Drug Users Accessing a Medically Supervised Safer Injection Facility. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1913080/>

¹⁰ Stoltz et al (2007). Changes in injecting practices associated with the use of a medically supervised safer injection facility. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/17229788/>

¹¹ Syringe Service Programs in Maryland. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1vObXy9Rxo-dxWhqMWUA6K-Fkd0Ooa3-h/view>