

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 953

March 3, 2023

The Honorable Joseline A. Peña-Melnyk
Chair, House Health and Government Operations Committee
Room 241, House Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

**RE: SUPPORT of House Bill 953
(Public Health – Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program) - FAVORABLE**

FROM: John Torsch, Baltimore County, Legislative District 8

Dear Chair Peña-Melnyk and House Health and Government Operations Committee Members,

The Daniel Carl Torsch Foundation (DCTF) advocates for harm reduction, addiction treatment, and recovery communities. DCTF supports House Bill 953 “Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program,” which will allow community based organizations such as ours to establish overdose prevention programs to reduce overdose deaths, which continue to occur at unprecedented levels in Maryland.

The DCTF, leads a 5 person community outreach team made up of peer recovery specialists with lived experience battling addiction. We have been a part of introducing several pieces of legislation that were signed into law, including the 2013 Overdose Response Program, which led to the standing orders for Naloxone that we have today. In 2010, my younger brother Danny died in my home of a multiple drug overdose. Since then I have represented our foundation in Danny's memory. It is essential to share that I have lost more than 50 friends and family members to drug overdoses, drug-related health complications, and violence related to drugs.

As a peer recovery specialist and person in long term recovery from drug addiction, my life is literally "all addiction all the time." During the last few years, I have researched the Overdose Prevention Sites (OPS) model heavily, including visiting six of these sites in four different countries. There is no question that these sites save lives, increase access to treatment and reduce the rate of infectious disease. These sites serve the most vulnerable and stigmatized population in our society.

Fentanyl and now Xylyzine have totally changed the game. Those of us working in this field realize that we are facing nothing less than chemical warfare. More people are using drugs in public places because they know the chance that they will overdose is high. How often do you see a bill proposed that does not ask for funding and simply asks for permission to save lives? That is all we are asking for with this bill, permission to save lives and treat our society's unwanted with the compassion they deserve and the skills that people like myself are trained for.

Recently, one of the people that I was providing peer support to, died of Fentanyl poisoning. All that he wanted was to live what he called "normal" life. The same lifestyle that countless people take for granted every day. He wanted to live in a place where he did not have to walk past a line of people who were selling the drugs that he desperately was fighting to avoid. He wanted to wake up in a bed in a warm house, have a cup of coffee and food in his fridge, drive an old pick up to a job he was good at so he could earn an honest wage. Then come home at night, eat dinner, sit in a recliner, and watch TV.

Repeatedly, he would say that this is all he wanted. He was so close, and we were working on a plan. All he needed was an ID to make it happen, but he could not get the ID in time. He never got that everyday life back. Instead, he died alone, in the cold, while carrying the Naloxone that he used to save several other lives. You won't see his story on the news, read about him in any newspaper, or see RIP posts on social media. His name was Brian. He was not a statistic, he was my friend, and I miss him. If he had access to an Overdose Prevention Site, chances are very strong he would have utilized the site and still have a chance at that "normal" life.

We recognize that this may be a controversial issue, and it is our intent to stand in support of all legislators who vote favorably on HB953. Mothers and fathers who have lost their children, treatment providers, addiction experts, and people in recovery from drug addiction, we will defend your decision with every breath and on every social media post.

I look to more progressive countries and states to see what is working because our current strategy is not working. The only hope we have to get ahead of this crisis is love and compassion, meeting people struggling where they are, reducing harm, and increasing access to treatment while providing peer support. The DCTF is prepared to offer our assistance in the operation of one of these Overdose Prevention Sites in an area of Baltimore County (21222).

Please take off our handcuffs and say YES to letting us, the boots on the ground, do what is necessary to save and improve countless lives. We respectfully ask that the House Health and Government Operations Committee give HB953 a favorable report to stem the rising tide of overdose deaths in Maryland.

Thank you,

John Torsch
Co-founder/Director of Special Programs
The Daniel Carl Torsch Foundation
dctfoundationinc.org
dctfoundationinc@gmail.com
410-847-4247