



HEALTH CARE FOR THE HOMELESS TESTIMONY
FAVORABLE
HB 173 – Drug Paraphernalia for Administration – Decriminalization

House Judiciary Committee
February 7, 2023

Health Care for the Homeless supports HB 173. This bill will save lives, reduce barriers to housing and employment, and prevent the spread of infectious diseases. As a healthcare facility serving over 10,000 of Maryland’s most vulnerable individuals each year, we see firsthand the effects of criminalizing substance use, particularly on Black and Latino/x communities. In Maryland, possession of drug paraphernalia can result in a fine up to \$500 and a misdemeanor – leading to a criminal record that can be used to deny someone housing and employment.¹

The criminalization of substance use and paraphernalia perpetuates homelessness and prevents individuals from seeking supportive services. When there is less fear of punishment or arrest by police, individuals feel safer accessing treatment.² By decriminalizing paraphernalia and implementing harm reduction principles, individuals are more inclined to carry and use life-saving supplies—such as sterile needles and safer smoking kits—that prevent overdose deaths and the spread of infectious diseases.³ The continued toll of opioid overdose deaths and related harms both warrants and necessitates decriminalization of paraphernalia. In addition to saving lives, this has enormous implications for lowering healthcare costs related to treating infectious diseases, like HIV.⁴

This bill demonstrates Maryland’s commitment to reframing substance use as a public health issue, not a criminal one. **As a health provider that sees how crucial and life-saving harm reduction and decriminalization are for the clients we serve, Health Care for the Homeless urges the committee to issue a favorable report on HB 173.**

Health Care for the Homeless is Maryland’s leading provider of integrated health services and supportive housing for individuals and families experiencing homelessness. Our mission is to end homelessness through racially equitable health care, housing and advocacy in partnership with those of us who have experienced it. We deliver medical care, mental health services, state-certified addiction treatment, dental care, social services, housing and housing support services for over 10,000 Marylanders annually in Baltimore City and Baltimore County. For more information, visit www.hchmd.org.

¹ MD Code Ann., Crim. Law, § 5-619 (2013).

² Laura Vearrier, “The Value of Harm Reduction for Injection Drug Use: A Clinical and Public Health Ethics Analysis,” *Disease-a-Month* 65, no. 5 (May 2019), pp. 119–41, available at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.disamonth.2018.12.002>.

³ *Id.*

⁴ David Wilson, et al., “The cost-effectiveness of harm reduction,” *International Journal of Drug Policy* 26, supp. 1 (February 2015), pp. S5-S11, available at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2014.11.007>.