

HEALTH CARE FOR THE HOMELESS TESTIMONY
IN SUPPORT OF
SB 427 – Public Health – Overdose and Infectious Disease
Prevention Services Program

Senate Finance Committee
February 20, 2024



Health Care for the Homeless supports SB 427, which would allow jurisdictions to establish overdose prevention programs to reduce overdose deaths, which continue to rise at an alarming pace in Maryland.

Health Care for the Homeless is a non-profit Federally Qualified Health Center that works to prevent and end homelessness for vulnerable individuals and families by providing quality, integrated health care and promoting access to affordable housing and sustainable incomes through direct service, advocacy and community engagement.

The General Assembly is well aware of the tremendous burden that heroin and other opioids are taking on Maryland residents. The numbers of fatalities related to drugs and alcohol continues to be staggering in Maryland. According to the latest report released by the Opioid Operational Command Center, there were over 2,000 unintentional intoxication deaths involving drugs and alcohol in Maryland between January and September. Maryland legislators have taken important steps to address this crisis, but overdoses and deaths continue to climb as we look for strategies to address this problem. Overdose prevention sites are an evidence-based harm reduction strategy proven to reduce overdose deaths and crime in neighboring areas. These sites provide a setting where people can use substances with sterile equipment and medical monitoring in place to prevent overdose and death. There has not been a single overdose fatality at any overdose prevention facility.

Just as importantly, these facilities will provide a vulnerable population with connections to substance use disorder, mental health and medical services. Overdose prevention sites are designed to engage people who are hardest to reach, including patients with untreated medical conditions who may not access hospital or primary care services due to fear of stigma. Many of these individuals live in poverty, with limited access to housing and other basic needs.

At Health Care for the Homeless, harm reduction strategies are a cornerstone of our work. We train our clients and the community to use naloxone to reverse an overdose and prevent death. Clients have told us with pride how they saved others by using the naloxone we gave them. In addition, we utilize medication-assisted treatment (MAT) with buprenorphine to treat opioid addiction and help to stabilize lives so that our clients can look for jobs and housing. We are dedicated to community partnerships with organizations that provide needle exchange services, which reduce the spread of HIV, Hepatitis C and other infectious diseases.

All of these harm reduction strategies - naloxone, medication assisted treatment (MAT), and needle exchange – caused concern when they first started. Yet, we have seen time and time again that as communities adopt these programs, overdose fatalities decrease, transmission of infectious diseases slows, and clients build more trusting relationships with medical providers to engage in long-term medical care. Overdose prevention

facilities are a continuation of this work. Clients who are current and former drug users have told our providers about the dangerous situations in which they are using heroin and other drugs – in abandoned row houses, in the boiler room of apartment buildings, and in restaurant bathrooms. It is our duty to meet them where they are and help keep them as safe as possible.

Overdose prevention facilities would provide a valuable tool to prevent overdose and death in a vulnerable population while connecting them to needed substance abuse, mental health and medical services. We urge the legislature to be a leader on this critical public health issue and ask for a favorable report on SB 427.

Health Care for the Homeless is Maryland's leading provider of integrated health services and supportive housing for individuals and families experiencing homelessness. We deliver medical care, mental health services, state-certified addiction treatment, dental care, social services, housing support services, and housing for over 10,000 Marylanders annually at sites in Baltimore City and Baltimore County.

Our Vision: Everyone is healthy and has a safe home in a just and respectful community.

Our Mission: We work to end homelessness through racially equitable health care, housing and advocacy in partnership with those of us who have experienced it.

For more information, visit www.hchmd.org.