

Testimony of the Human Trafficking Prevention Project

BILL NO: House Bill 1096
TITLE: Public Health – Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program
COMMITTEE: Health & Government Operations Committee
HEARING DATE: March 1, 2024
POSITION: FAVORABLE

House Bill 1096 would authorize the establishment of an Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program to provide centers for the safe and sterile consumption of pre-obtained drugs. The centers would also provide sterile needles, administer first aid as needed, and provide access to addiction services. [The Human Trafficking Prevention Project](#) supports this bill because, in addition to reducing the risk of overdose and incarceration for all people who use drugs, it also has the potential to decrease the risk of exploitation and violence that women who use drugs so often face

The opioid epidemic has had a substantial impact on the country, and on the State of Maryland. There were 2,587 fatal overdoses in Maryland in 2022, a 0.9% annual decrease from 2021. Despite this, overdoses increased in 9 of 24 counties in Maryland, accounting for 47% of the state’s total population. These include the state’s counties with the most Black and Latino people, as well as 4/5ths of the poorest counties in Maryland. But while deaths related to heroin and prescription opioids have trended downward in recent years, fentanyl-related deaths have continued to rise. With the constant year to year increase in these numbers, it’s critical to remember that in 2012, there were only 29 deaths from fentanyl, while in 2023, the overdose death rate topped 112,000 in a 12-month period for the first time, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. With these historically high rates of overdose and death, not to mention the collateral consequences that attach to drug-related incarceration, our state faces a public health crisis of historic proportions. Our current strategies are not enough to reduce overdose fatalities in Maryland’s most marginalized communities. Countering it and preventing needless deaths requires an innovative approach.

For women who use drugs, [exposure to gender-based violence is one of the defining characteristics of street-based drug use](#). As a result, the establishment of safe, regulated spaces that mitigate these dangers holds great promise for reducing these harms. [A central theme in the experiences of the women who use safe injection sites in Vancouver, Canada](#), was that they specifically sought out these sites in an effort to diminish the threat of violence they faced using drugs on the streets or in street-adjacent environments. Many of the women shared that they had been exploited for drugs or money by men in exchange for a safe place to use, and that they were commonly subjected to physical violence following disputes over control of the drugs or money that the women themselves were often made responsible for obtaining. For many women, safe injection sites were described as “safe havens” that provided a temporary escape from violence and exposure to police.

Decreasing the risk of incarceration while at the same time increasing safe usage and support lessens the harms associated with drug use for *all* people who use drugs; however, for women who use drugs, a population already at heightened risk for myriad predatory abuses, these sites also decrease the likelihood of violence and exploitation because they are less likely to have to rely on a potential trafficker for a place to use more safely, or to live their lives in the shadows where exploitation thrives. By providing safe injection sites, sterile needles, along with first aid and other services, HB 1096 would reduce the harms women who use drugs face, including their risk of violence and exploitation. For these reasons, the Human Trafficking Prevention Project supports House Bill 1096. We respectfully urge a favorable report.

The Human Trafficking Prevention Project is dedicated to ending the criminalization of sex workers and survivors of human trafficking through access to civil legal services and support for policies that dismantle harmful systems and increase access to basic human rights and legal relief.

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