



March 1, 2024

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 1096
(Public Health – Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program) - FAVORABLE**

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

Baltimore Harm Reduction Coalition (BHRC) is an advocacy organization that mobilizes community members for the health, dignity, and safety of people targeted by the war on drugs and anti- sex worker policies. As a certified Overdose Response Program, Naloxone distributor, and syringe service program, we have provided essential health care services across the state for years. To supplement the life-saving services provided by us and dozens of other harm reduction programs across the state, BHRC supports House Bill 1096 (Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program). HB1096 is enabling legislation that allows up to 6 community based organizations (CBOs) to establish pilot Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Programs to reduce overdose deaths, which continue to occur at alarming rates in Maryland.

Our community and loved ones are facing an increasingly deadly overdose epidemic. During 2022, we lost 2,587 Marylanders to fatal overdose. Our state has taken laudable steps to reduce the devastation of the overdose crisis, but they do not go far enough to halt the overdose epidemic. The General Assembly has approved measures to expand access to the life-saving medication naloxone, increase behavioral health treatment, and establish syringe services programs throughout the state. While these essential policies have increased opportunities for health and safety, the situation remains dire.

Overdose and infectious disease prevention services are an intervention proven for over 30 years of research to prevent overdose death, connect people who use drugs to care and other supportive services, and reduce public drug use and hazardous waste in public spaces. The proposed Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program mirrors the over 200 programs already established across the world in 14 countries, including two in the United States. In all of the OPS around the world, in which millions of supervised drug use interactions have occurred, **no one has died of a fatal overdose.**

Successful overdose prevention services programs offered around the world, including those in New York City, are operated by legally-authorized syringe services programs (SSPs). We are grateful to the 2016 Maryland General Assembly for passing legislation that enabled harm reduction programs in our state to establish an infrastructure for a statewide network of syringe service programs. BHRC was the first authorized community-based SSP in Maryland, allowing us to provide life-saving supplies to upwards of 900 people each year. Today, Maryland is home to 23 SSPs and hundreds of certified harm reduction providers. HB1096 will allow organizations in this large supportive SSP network to request approval from the Department of Health to operate a 4-year pilot OPS with almost no cost to the state.

Under this legislation, local jurisdictions in coordination with the Maryland Department of Health, will be enabled to authorize OPS operations based on their jurisdiction's unique needs and community support.

Over the past few years, BHRC has been working closely with the Baltimore City Health Department, Mayor Brandon Scott's Administration, and Baltimore City Council to determine the feasibility of authorizing OPS in our city. This work has been quite successful, as our Mayor and other city leadership have expressed strong support of OPS operations to increase the health, wellness, and dignity of our city's residents. Baltimore City leadership, residents, and community organizations are eager to provide overdose prevention services. If passed, HB1096 would provide the necessary state action for Baltimore City to carry out these plans.

This is an emergency and we urge you to act now. **We ask that the House Health and Government Operations Committee give HB1096 a favorable report.**

For additional information or questions regarding this legislation, please contact BHRC's Policy Manager, Owen O'Keefe, at owen@baltimoreharmreduction.org