



March 1, 2024

**RE: SUPPORT of House Bill 1096
(Public Health - Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program) -
FAVORABLE**

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

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

BRIDGES Coalition for Overdose Prevention Sites supports *HB1096 - Public Health - Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program*. This bill will allow community-based organizations, such as our trained membership of over 30 organizations and dozens of harm reduction workers, to establish overdose prevention programs to reduce overdose deaths, which continue to occur at unprecedented levels in Maryland.

Founded in March 2017, BRIDGES Coalition for Overdose Prevention Sites (OPS) is a statewide Baltimore-based advocacy coalition working to end overdose and criminalization by promoting safe spaces, dignity, health, and justice for people who use drugs. BRIDGES was founded with funding from the Drug Policy Alliance and Open Society Foundations, international resources for drug policy reform and reparative justice for communities harmed by the war on drugs. Our coalition was created to address needs named by Maryland policymakers during committee hearings and delegation meetings in 2016, when then-Delegate Dan Morhaim first presented this bill to authorize OPS. **Since the bill was first introduced, Maryland has lost over 17,000 individuals to fatal overdose. We cannot overemphasize the significance of these losses on loved ones, communities, and our state as a whole.**

BRIDGES Coalition is dedicated to ensuring Maryland State authorizes OPS. For the past six years, our coalition has led public education and community mobilization efforts via monthly community organizing meetings, mock demonstrations of OPS, community dialogues, informational hearings with the Baltimore City Council, online messaging campaigns, an [educational video series](#), focus groups, surveys with various stakeholders, and ten Maryland General Assembly committee hearings. Each year, we host several events in partnership with places of worship, treatment programs, neighborhood associations, cultural centers, and public officials -- all with the same goal of addressing potential community concerns around overdose prevention sites being set up across our state. We engage Marylanders new to the concept of Overdose Prevention Sites, and every person has walked away with a deeper understanding and support for these life-saving services.

Maryland needs Overdose Prevention Sites; indoor spaces where individuals can consume pre-obtained drugs in the presence of trained professionals with immediate access to life-saving interventions, medical care, emotional support, and non-judgmental therapeutic relationships.

We recognize that OPS are not the sole solution to the overdose epidemic and could never replace treatment services. OPS are a crisis intervention positioned within the continuum of care to reduce overdose rates. To most effectively save lives from the growing overdose epidemic, Marylanders

need and deserve overdose prevention sites that are community and peer-run, grounded in mutual aid efforts, and implemented with a social justice framework.

For over 30 years, it has been proven globally that overdose prevention sites save lives. In all 200+ OPS around the world, in which millions of supervised drug injections have occurred, no one has died of a fatal overdose. In its first year of operation, the first sites sanctioned in the United States, OnPointNYC reversed over 600 overdoses – six times the number of lives predicted to be saved when these sites first opened in November 2021. BRIDGES Coalition has built a strong relationship with OnPointNYC, having organized tours of the sites for Delegate Peña-Melnyk, Delegate Robbyn Lewis, Senator Shelly Hettleman, Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott, several other members of Baltimore City leadership, and over a dozen Maryland-based harm reduction workers. All who visited the sites have left with a renewed conviction that OPS are needed in our state now.

In 2022, we lost 2,587 Marylanders to fatal overdoses. We urge the Maryland General Assembly to authorize overdose and infectious disease prevention services, an intervention proven for over 30 years of research to decrease overdose deaths. The proposed Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program mirrors the 200 such 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.**

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 more information about the BRIDGES Coalition for Overdose Prevention Sites, please contact Cola Anderson at cola@baltimoreharmreduction.org.

