

February 27, 2024

Delegate Joseline A. Peña-Melnyk, Chair
Delegate Bonnie Cullison, Vice Chair
Health and Government Operations Committee
Room 241, House Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Re: Writing In Support - HB1096 Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program

Dear Delegate Peña-Melnyk, Delegate Cullison, and Members of the Health and Government Operations Committee,

My name is Reanna Beatty, I am an Occupational Therapy student and a Certified Athletic Trainer. I am writing not just as a healthcare practitioner but as a family member who has witnessed firsthand the devastating impact of substance use disorder and opioid overdose. As the overdose crisis continues to evolve in Maryland, demonstrated by the 2,737 fatal overdoses in 2021ⁱ, we must take a pragmatic, evidence-based approach to address this public health issue and to save lives.

To begin addressing this public health issue, we first need to reduce risk and remove the barriers that prevent people from accessing effective interventions. Harm reduction, being a widely effective and successful intervention, uses practical strategies to meet people where they are to improve individual and community well-being and health. Decades of strong research on harm reduction strategies, specifically syringe services and naloxone distribution, demonstrate that these strategies are associated with reduced morbidity, mortality, and transmission of infectious diseasesⁱⁱ; as well as improved individual health outcomes and services engagement.

As the sister of an addict in recovery, I have seen the challenges and pain that come with the battle against addiction. I have seen the stigma and discrimination towards people who use drugs, as well as the absence of support services caused by the gap in community and health care services. I have also witnessed the positive impact of the life saving medication, naloxone. I am eternally grateful that emergency medical services (EMS) were dispatched in time to save my brother from multiple overdoses. But, I often think about what would have happened had the ambulance not arrived in time or if 911 was not called at all, especially considering Maryland's opioid-related deaths continue to increase at a staggering rate.

Creating overdose prevention centers in Maryland not only provides people who use drugs with greater opportunities for recovery, they also make healthcare and wraparound services more accessible. This would include resources for mental health care, basic needs (e.g., housing or food), medical services, and addiction treatment. They offer hope, guidance, and a roadmap towards recovery. Which is something my family and I could have only dreamed of when my brother was suffering in active addiction.

It is critical to recognize addiction as a disease and public health issue. One that requires understanding and support rather than judgment. Addiction is an adversary that affects not just the individual but the entire support network. Now that I have read about HB1096, I can only imagine what a resource like this could have done for my brother and how different his life could have been if these kinds of policies, supports, and services were available. This is why providing our community with the Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program outlined in HB1096 is paramount. It would be the first sustainable step to fewer overdoses, reductions in emergency department visits, increased access to addiction treatment, and improved public order. Through collectively advocating for more accessible support services we not only support people who use drugs but also contribute to building a more compassionate and understanding community.

I ask you for a favorable report for HB1096.

Sincerely,

Reanna Beatty
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^{i.} Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC]. (2023, August 28). *Maryland priority topic investments*.
<https://www.cdc.gov/injury/budget/policystatesnapshots/Maryland.html>

^{ii.} U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (n.d.). *Harm reduction*.
<https://www.hhs.gov/overdose-prevention/harm-reduction>