

HB 0706 - Drug Paraphernalia for Administration - Decriminalization

Judiciary Committee
February 9th, 2024

Position: Favorable

Dear Chair Clippinger and members of the Judiciary Committee,

I am writing to express my strong support for HB0706, the decriminalization of drug paraphernalia for administration. As a constituent, social worker, and researcher, I urge you to vote in favor of this bill, as you did in 2022.

I work at SPARC, a program focusing on supporting individuals who use drugs and engage in sex work. SPARC stands firmly behind HB0706 and respectfully requests a favorable vote. By decriminalizing individuals with substance use disorders and those who use drugs, this bill advocates for a public health approach rooted in evidence to address the overdose crisis.

It is clear that current strategies to reduce overdose deaths have not been effective, necessitating a bold shift in approach. HB0706 holds the potential to decrease disease transmission and related healthcare expenditures, facilitate access to life-saving services, and mitigate the risk of overdose fatalities. Research demonstrates that providing sterile syringes significantly reduces the transmission of diseases such as HIV, Hepatitis B, and Hepatitis C. Given Baltimore's objective to end HIV transmission by 2030, it is imperative to enact policies aligned with this community goal.

The financial investment in sterile syringes pales in comparison to the substantial costs associated with AIDS treatment over a lifetime, which exceeds \$600,000. However, people can't benefit from programs offering sterile syringes, sharps containers, Narcan, drug testing strips, healthcare, and social services when they face the threat of criminalization and arrest. Punitive measures, fear tactics, and the current patchwork legal framework dissuade individuals from seeking the support, healthcare, and information that every Marylander deserves.

Studies indicate that individuals who access syringe programs are more likely to discontinue injection drug use and seek treatment. Moreover, programs like SPARC play a pivotal role in engaging historically marginalized, oppressed, and underserved populations in care. The existing laws pertaining to paraphernalia are akin to criminalizing insulin syringes and being confused as to why people don't take their life saving medication.

Current legislation disproportionately impacts marginalized individuals, exacerbating challenges and heightening the risk of overdose. A conviction for paraphernalia possession can jeopardize an individual's prospects of securing stable housing, accessing food stamps, or entering the shelter system, further perpetuating vulnerabilities and increasing the likelihood of overdose. The \$500 cost of paraphernalia possession could go towards someone's security deposit at their home, and stable housing drastically reduces overdose death risk.

HB 0706 exemplifies Maryland's commitment to health, equity, and innovation, positioning the state as a trailblazer in combatting the overdose crisis. As social workers, healthcare providers, and individuals who have endured the harsh realities of existing policies, we urge you to vote favorably for HB0706.

Thank you,

Jess "Red" Nesbitt, LMSW, CBIS
SPARC Women's Center