



February 9, 2024

**House Judiciary Committee
TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT**

HB 706 - Drug Paraphernalia for Administration- Decriminalization

Behavioral Health System Baltimore (BHSB) is a nonprofit organization that serves as the local behavioral health authority (LBHA) for Baltimore City. BHSB works to increase access to a full range of quality behavioral health (mental health and substance use) services and advocates for innovative approaches to prevention, early intervention, treatment and recovery for individuals, families, and communities. Baltimore City represents nearly 35 percent of the public behavioral health system in Maryland, serving over 100,000 people with mental illness and substance use disorders (collectively referred to as “behavioral health”) annually.

Behavioral Health System Baltimore supports HB 706 - Drug Paraphernalia for Administration- Decriminalization. Decriminalizing the possession and use of drug paraphernalia would promote trust between harm reduction programs and people who use drugs while having a negligible impact on public safety. BHSB urges the General Assembly to support his legislation and focus on saving lives rather than punitive approaches to substance use.

The number of overdose deaths in Maryland has skyrocketed in the last ten years. About 2,500 people die of fatal overdose in the state every year, including 1,000 who die in Baltimore City.¹ Preventing this unconscionable loss of life must be the state’s top priority. The continued increase in overdose deaths highlight how important it is to continue to promote harm reduction practices and to treat substance use disorders as a public health issue.

BHSB supports HB 706 because we recognize the criminalization of substance use and paraphernalia often prevents people from seeking treatment and supportive services. Also, current drug paraphernalia laws create a disproportionate impact on people of color further exacerbating inequities in treatment access. Evidence has shown that when there is less fear of punishment or arrest by police, individuals feel safer accessing treatment.² HB 706 will reduce the collateral damage caused by incarceration by helping to ensure that people are accessing syringe service programs or carry lifesaving supplies that prevent overdose deaths and the spread of infectious diseases.

Decriminalizing paraphernalia will help prioritize health and safety over punishment and begin to reduce the harm caused by the war on drugs particularly in black and brown communities. **BHSB urges the House Judiciary Committee to support HB 706.**

For more information, please contact BHSB Policy Director Dan Rabbitt at 443-401-6142

Endnotes:

¹ Maryland’s Overdose Data Dashboard, available at: <https://stopoverdose.maryland.gov/dashboard/>

² Laura Vearrier, “The Value of Harm Reduction for Injection Drug Use: A Clinical and Public Health Ethics Analysis,” *Disease-a-Month* 65, no. 5 (May 2019), pp. 119–41, available at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.disamonth.2018.12.002>.