

February 4, 2025

The Honorable Senator Pamela Beidle
Chair, Senate Finance Committee
3 East, Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

RE: SUPPORT of Senate Bill 0083
(Public Health – Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program) - FAVORABLE

Dear Chair Beidle and Senate Finance Committee Members,

My name is Gerardo Benavides and I am the Board Chair of the Baltimore Harm Reduction Coalition (BHRC), and am writing to support Senate Bill 0083 “Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program”. SB0083 will allow community based organizations to establish overdose prevention programs to reduce overdose deaths, which continue to occur at alarming levels in Maryland.

Part of BHRC’s mission is to mobilize communities in Baltimore City, and across the state of Maryland for the health, dignity and safety of people who use drugs, and have been targeted by harmful policies in the past. Our staff are an exemplary group of individuals who work directly with communities by providing life-saving services, resources, and education to people who use drugs and their allies. Providing Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Programs is an essential need required at a critical time for the state of Maryland. Creating and expanding these programs will literally save lives: Overdose Prevention Centers, or OPCs, reduce overdose death and get people connected to ongoing care. Decades of research has shown that OPCs reduce overdose deaths, reduce risky behaviors associated with HIV and hepatitis, and are a critical entry point into needed health services for people who use drugs. They improve public safety and increase the safety for drug users in our community by reducing public drug use and keeping drug users out of harm’s way through violent street interactions. In our collective fight against fatal overdoses, OPCs are an essential tool that can be used to address a plethora of social issues. Our staff and the people we work with would have a much-needed resource to help them in the fight to expand harm reduction services to the community—a connecting point, and a community point, that can save lives.

Between December 2023 and November 2024, we lost 1,689 Marylanders to fatal overdoses. We urge the Maryland General Assembly to authorize overdose and infectious disease prevention services, an intervention proven for over 35 years of research to decrease overdose deaths. The proposed Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program mirrors the 200 evidence-based public health interventions already established across the world in 14 countries, including two in the United States. Trained personnel monitor participants for signs of overdose and intervene to prevent or reverse overdoses. In addition to overdose prevention services, OPCs provide a welcoming space that helps bring drug use indoors and connect people to long-term, life-sustaining resources, like addiction services and social supports, including voluntary treatment.

This is an emergency and we urge you to act now. We ask that the Senate Finance Committee give SB0083 a favorable report.

For more information about the Baltimore Harm Reduction Coalition or this position, please contact me, Gerardo Benavides, at gbenavi17@gmail.com.

Thank you, and please give SB0083 a favorable report.