

HEALTH CARE FOR THE HOMELESS TESTIMONY
IN SUPPORT OF
SB 83 – Public Health – Overdose and Infectious Disease
Prevention Services Program

Senate Finance Committee
February 4, 2025



Health Care for the Homeless strongly supports SB 83, which would allow jurisdictions to establish overdose prevention programs to reduce overdose deaths, which continue to rise at an alarming pace in Maryland. For the importance of this lifesaving measure, this is a priority bill for Health Care for the Homeless, as it has been in previous years.

Health Care for the Homeless is a non-profit Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) that works to prevent and end homelessness for vulnerable individuals and families by providing quality, integrated health care and promoting access to affordable housing and sustainable incomes through direct service, advocacy and community engagement.

At Health Care for the Homeless, harm reduction strategies are a cornerstone of our work. We train our clients and the community to use naloxone to reverse an overdose and prevent death. Clients have told us with pride how they saved others by using the naloxone we gave them. In addition, we utilize medication-assisted treatment (MAT) with buprenorphine to treat opioid addiction and help to stabilize lives so that our clients can look for jobs and housing. And in 2021, we were proud to become the first becoming the first FQHC in Maryland to begin a Syringe Service Program, providing syringes for safer drug use.

The General Assembly is well aware of the tremendous burden that overdoses have taken on Maryland residents. Between December 2023 and November 2024, we lost 1,689 Marylanders to fatal overdoses. Maryland legislators have taken important steps to address this crisis, including the authorization of syringe services, which has become a key service we provide. Despite the General Assembly taking a number of actions, overdoses and deaths continue to climb as we look for strategies to address this problem. Overdose Prevention Centers (OPCs) are an evidence-based harm reduction strategy proven to reduce overdose deaths and crime in neighboring areas. These centers provide a setting where people can use substances with sterile equipment and medical monitoring in place to prevent overdose and death.

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. As such, OPCs are such an effective overdose prevention tool because, in large part, it allows the provision of the most basic principle of good clinical care: trust. According to our Harm Reduction Manager, Molly Greenberg, RN:

Our clients experience stigma at every turn, often leading to internalized shame, disengagement with healthcare, and isolation from all of the systems and people who have abandoned them. Loneliness and fear are proven to be associated with overdose, so our number one responsibility is to create an environment in which people feel they will be met with compassion at every single encounter. Thoughtful overdose prevention strategies moves us away from dehumanizing punitive practices and towards a culture of connection and healing in a way that is meaningful to each individual person.

Ms. Greenberg also submitted testimony detailing her own experiences as a nurse. OPCs would provide a valuable tool to prevent overdose and death in a vulnerable population while connecting them to needed substance abuse, mental health and medical services. We urge the legislature to be a leader on this critical public health issue and ask for a favorable report on SB 83.

Health Care for the Homeless is Maryland's leading provider of integrated health services and supportive housing for individuals and families experiencing homelessness. We deliver medical care, mental health services, state-certified addiction treatment, dental care, social services, housing support services, and housing for over 11,000 Marylanders annually at centers in Baltimore City and Baltimore County.

Our Vision: Everyone is healthy and has a safe home in a just and respectful community.

Our Mission: We work to end homelessness through racially equitable health care, housing and advocacy in partnership with those of us who have experienced it.

For more information, visit www.hchmd.org.