

February 26, 2025

The Honorable Delegate Joseline A. Pena-Melnyk
Chair, House Health and Government Operations Committee
240 Taylor House Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

RE: Support for House Bill 845 (Public Health - Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program) – FAVORABLE

Dear Chair Pena-Melnyk and House Health and Government Operations Committee,

I am writing on behalf of the Maryland Alliance for Sensible Drug Policy (MASDP) to express our strong support for House Bill 845 (Public Health - Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program).

MASDP is a newly formed, member-led organization composed of individuals with lived experience using illicit substances. Our mission is to empower and mobilize people with past or present substance use to advocate for policies that protect their health, wellness, and autonomy. We firmly believe that effective public policy must be grounded in evidence, expertise, and—most importantly—the experiences of those directly impacted. This is why we support House Bill 845, which would allow community-based organizations to establish overdose prevention centers (OPCs) – a proven, evidence-based intervention that saves lives and connects individuals who use substances to essential health and social services.

As you are aware, Maryland continues to experience alarming rates of overdose deaths, devastating families and communities across the state. OPCs offer an effective, compassionate response to this crisis. These centers provide a safe, supervised environment where individuals can use pre-obtained substances under the care of trained staff who are equipped to intervene in the event of an overdose. By implementing OPCs, we can reduce fatal overdoses while also preventing the spread of infectious diseases such as HIV and hepatitis C. Evidence shows that jurisdictions that have adopted OPCs have seen reductions in overdose fatalities, emergency room visits, and public drug use.

Beyond their role in preventing overdose deaths, OPCs serve as critical access points for vital health and social services, meeting people where they are with nonjudgmental, life-saving support. These services include:

- **Harm Reduction Services:** Distribution of sterile supplies to prevent infections and education on safer use to reduce associated risks.
- **Linkage to Treatment and Recovery Services:** Building trust with participants and offering pathways to medication-assisted treatment (MAT), counseling, and other evidence-based recovery supports.
- **Medical and Mental Health Care:** Connecting individuals to primary care, wound care, and mental health services to address often untreated conditions.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, many individuals who use substances experience profound isolation, stigma, and dehumanization, which can further entrench them in cycles of harm and despair. Society often marginalizes and vilifies people who use drugs, stripping them of their dignity and reinforcing barriers to care and support. OPCs serve as a vital counterforce to this reality by providing a safe, nonjudgmental space where individuals are met with compassion rather than condemnation. Within these centers, they are not seen solely through the lens of their substance use but recognized as whole human beings deserving of care, respect, and the opportunity to improve their health and well-being.

On behalf of the Maryland Alliance for Sensible Drug Policy, I urge the House Health and Government Operations Committee to give House Bill 845 a favorable report and allow Maryland to join the growing number of jurisdictions embracing this humane, evidence-based approach to addressing the overdose crisis. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Thomas C. Higdon
Executive Director
Maryland Alliance for Sensible Drug Policy