

February 26, 2025

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

RE: SUPPORT of House Bill 845

(Public Health – Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program) - FAVORABLE

Dear Chair Pena-Melnyk and members of the Health Government and Operations Committee,

My name is Cola Anderson my pronouns are She/Her/Goddess and I am a community organizer and leader of the BRIDGES Coalition for Overdose Prevention Sites. The BRIDGES Coalition (Baltimore Resources for Indoor Drug-use Grassroots Education & Safety) advocates for Overdose Prevention Sites by advancing harm reduction strategies to improve health and justice in and around Baltimore, Maryland.

Last year I gave a testimony while high about how drugs influenced my life in a positive way. Though I didn't mention it then, I was "high" from all doctor prescribed drugs used as advised. Though I have used drugs chaotically through the years I wanted to give a different face and voice than the one's i've heard pouring their souls out of this bill year after year. I wanted my honest testimony to open eyes and ears to marginalized folks and the silenced PWUD by bringing in vulnerability and humanity into my testimony.

Trans people are often forgotten and/or overlooked in this conversation of Overdose Prevention Site implementation in Baltimore but we are dying from shame and overdosing alone too. Invisible communities are only invisible to some. I don't have the privilege of not dedicating my life to my people who use drugs because I want them to continue to be seen, supported, loved, understood and taken care of and Overdose Preventions Sites do that.

Overdose prevention sites save lives immediately, period. We know this because they are all over the world and also because we spent the past three years working closely with OnPoint NYC. I brought 40 + brought between 2022-2024, city and state council members, public health officials and BRIDGES members all to experience the joy that surrounds this health hub focused on living. One of the group included the mayor who has named Overdose Prevention Sites in this executive priorities.

Everyone left differently than how they entered the Overdose Prevention Site in New York regardless of any additional questions about what they may have seen and felt the magic that is Overdose Prevention Sites as a harm reduction. When I see homeless folks who use drugs and don't have access to safe spaces I think of what a non-traditional approach to healing could look like for them.

The time to legally authorize OPS in Baltimore is now! Being a leader of the BRIDGES coalition, I facilitate monthly meetings and demonstrations where the connections I have built with my fellow coalition members and the work we come together to do is so impactful and is built on the foundation of harm reduction, safety and standing on the back of so many lost ancestors OD's. OPS are spaces for the community too, not just people who use drugs. OPS offers more than a safe place to consume drugs.

BRIDGES has done non operational OPS pop ups for years now. These spaces were used for folks to see the set up of what one could look like and to learn more about how the space is used and about the additional benefits it provides to the person using drugs and in return uplifting everything/everyone surrounding that person. Touching one life could result in the development of self love and that ultimately could lead to recovery/ treatment if desired. Treatment/Rehabs are a tool that is outdated, over used and not all of them are operating under the same intention or mission of care and wellness. We already are saturated with MAT programs in Baltimore. We don't need another one, we need an OPS! This introduction of an OPS will change the landscape of the drug war in Baltimore. Please pass this bill.

This is an emergency and we urge you to act now. **We ask that the Health Government and Operations Committee give HB845 a favorable report.**

For more information about BRIDGES or this position, please contact Cola Anderson at Cola@baltimoreharmreduction.org.