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PERSONAL TESTIMONY IN FAVOR OF HOUSE BILL 845

Public Health – Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program

Health and Government Operations Committee

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As a future social worker and lifelong Marylander, **I strongly support HB 845 Public Health – Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program.** The passage of HB 845 would allow for the creation of up to six Overdose Prevention Sites (OPS). These centers would provide a safe place for people who use drugs (PWUD) to consume previously obtained substances such as opiates. Sterile equipment would be accessible to prevent the spread of infectious diseases and in the case of overdose, qualified staff would be nearby to intervene. Overdose prevention sites also present the opportunity for outreach to a vulnerable population that is often hidden in the shadows of isolation due to the stigmatization and shame. This bill is cross-filed (SB 83) and has been introduced for many years with strong support from community stakeholders such as yourself.

The US leads the world in overdose rates as a major outlier; Scotland takes second place with a rate that is a massive 22 percent lower. Fatal overdoses are impacting the United States more than any other country which begs the question “Why aren’t we also leading the charge when it comes to innovation harm reduction initiatives and policy?” Overdose prevention sites are not a new phenomenon when attempting to reduce overdose mortality. The number of overdose prevention sites across the nation is approaching 200, most of which have reported successful harm reduction. A study done by the Vancouver Institute saw a 35% decrease in overdose deaths within a 500 meter radius perimeter of an OPS. City areas outside of this perimeter saw just a 9% decrease which demonstrates the success these sites are capable of when given the opportunity to take root. In 2021 New York established two OPS and in just the first four months close to 200 overdose reversals were reported. Maryland has seen a steady increase of drug overdose deaths as has the rest of the country. We are just now beginning to see the success of harm reduction as fatal overdose numbers begin to slowly decrease—we must not stop there. In 2021 Maryland reported 42.8 overdose related deaths per 100,000 which represents a startling increase of 31.1 deaths in just a ten year period. The United States saw an increase of 19.2 deaths across this same ten year window which put the country at 32.4 per 100,000 by 2021. **With Maryland trending well above the national average, our state must be a leader when it comes to combating this worsening public health crisis.**

Overdose prevention centers don’t just prevent death, they also help to curb the spread of disease. When it comes to hepatitis C transmissions, it is estimated that people who inject drugs (PWID) are accountable for more than 80% of them. The United States Department of Health and Human Services details that, in the United States, the leading cause of hepatitis C transmission is injecting drugs. They also commend harm reduction services, such as syringe service programs, for being an outlet for reducing the spread of hepatitis C. These same programs assist in reducing the transmission of HIV and other diseases. **By reducing the number of people who catch these diseases, we are in turn minimizing strain on medical facilities and budgets.** Investing in harm reduction reaps economic benefits alongside the necessary improvements on public health welfare. A study by Amos Irwin, of Law Enforcement Action Partnership Silver Spring, estimates that every dollar spent to implement an OPS in Baltimore would result in return savings of \$4.35. By spending 1.79 million dollars, the estimated yearly

cost of implementing this OPS, we would in return save 7.77 million dollars. Given the state of our budget this year, this type of additional money is desperately needed to fund other causes across our state for years to come. **Supporting HB 845 will save not only lives, it will also save money and support our state economy at a time when we most need it.**

Funding overdose prevention centers receives a lot of contention due to the false belief that these institutions increase drug use within their communities. **In its 2021 fiscal year report the National Institutes of Health, alongside the Center for Disease Control and Department of Health and Human Services, concluded that there has been absolutely no evidence that the operation of overdose prevention centers leads to inflated crime or drug use in the nearby vicinity.** Rather, these sites reduce the rates of public drug use and in some cases even reduce crime. People who use drugs are going to use them regardless of whether or not we implement an overdose prevention site. However, what these sites will do is get people who do use drugs off the streets and into a supervised and controlled setting where they can be kept safe. Resources and social services will be accessible and that **will lead to harm reduction across our communities and our state.**

I would like to conclude this testimony by speaking to the impact opioid addiction has had on my own story. My father got addicted to opioids in 2004, the same year that OxyContin was being regarded as a regularly abused, and addictive, drug in the United States. My dad had suffered a traumatic fall this same year and he found himself leaving the hospital in a full body cast with rods in his back and a prescription for OxyContin in his hand. **In November of 2022 my father died of a heroin overdose and forever lost his chance at recovery and redemption.** Over those previous two decades I watched my dad struggle with this addiction before finally succumbing to it as so many have before him. My dad was not just a drug addict, he was one of the most generous and kind-hearted people to walk this earth. He would give the shirt off his back to anyone who asked for it. My dad taught me how to drive and how to paint a mailbox. He promoted an unwavering work ethic and was the first person to tell me that if you aren't early, you're late. My dad ran his own business and would get up at 4am religiously to pick up all of his employees who couldn't get to work on their own. **My dad was a loving and devoted father; and he was also addicted to drugs.** I think people often forget that people who use drugs are still parents, children, and friends. People who use drugs don't always get addicted—but sometimes they do. Drug addiction is not a moral failing but rather a public health crisis that we cannot arrest or ignore our way out of. People who use drugs do not need more shame and punishment—what they need is support. My father's death was preventable and so were the other 105,007 overdose deaths that occurred across the nation in 2023. This is about equal to the number of people living in Kent County, Somerset County, Garrett County, and Dorchester County combined. **Overdose prevention centers can, and will, save lives.** These centers will give people the resources they need to stay safe and will provide an avenue for recovery if given the opportunity to. You have a responsibility to give people who use drugs, and the people who love them, a second chance at life. **That is why I urge you to vote in favor of this life saving legislation.**

Respectfully,

Morgan H. Carroll

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