

HEALTH CARE FOR THE HOMELESS TESTIMONY
FAVORABLE
HB 556 – Drug Paraphernalia for Administration – Decriminalization

House Judiciary Committee
February 11, 2025



Health Care for the Homeless supports HB 556. This bill will save lives, reduce barriers to housing and employment, and prevent the spread of infectious diseases. As a healthcare facility serving over 10,000 of Maryland’s most vulnerable individuals each year, we see firsthand the effects of criminalizing substance use, particularly on Black and Latino/x communities. In Maryland, possession of drug paraphernalia can result in a fine up to \$500 and a misdemeanor – leading to a criminal record that can be used to deny someone housing and employment.¹

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 Federally Qualified Health Center in Maryland to begin a Syringe Service Program, providing syringes for safer drug use.

The criminalization of substance use and paraphernalia perpetuates homelessness and prevents individuals from seeking supportive services. When there is less fear of punishment or arrest by police, individuals feel safer accessing treatment.² By decriminalizing paraphernalia and implementing harm reduction principles, individuals are more inclined to carry and use life-saving supplies—such as sterile needles and safer smoking kits—that prevent overdose deaths and the spread of infectious diseases.³ The continued toll of opioid overdose deaths and related harms both warrants and necessitates decriminalization of paraphernalia. In addition to saving lives, this has enormous implications for lowering healthcare costs related to treating infectious diseases, like HIV.⁴

This bill demonstrates Maryland’s commitment to reframing substance use as a public health issue, not a criminal one. **As a health provider that sees how crucial and life-saving harm reduction and decriminalization are for the clients we serve, Health Care for the Homeless urges the committee to issue a favorable report on HB 556.**

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 12,000 Marylanders annually at sites 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.

¹ MD Code Ann., Crim. Law, § 5-619 (2013).

² Laura Vearrier, “The Value of Harm Reduction for Injection Drug Use: A Clinical and Public Health Ethics Analysis,” *Disease-a-Month* 65, no. 5 (May 2019), pp. 119–41, available at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.disamonth.2018.12.002>.

³ *Id.*

⁴ David Wilson, et al., “The cost-effectiveness of harm reduction,” *International Journal of Drug Policy* 26, supp. 1 (February 2015), pp. S5-S11, available at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2014.11.007>.