

February 11, 2025
The Honorable Chair Delegate Luke Clippinger
Chairman, House Judiciary Committee
100-101 Taylor House Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

RE: SUPPORT of House Bill 556 - Criminal Law - Drug Paraphernalia for Administration - Decriminalization

FAVORABLE

Dear Chair Clippinger and members of the House Judiciary Committee,

I am writing to you both as an independently licensed social worker, living in District 46, and as the founder of a small local business, Grey Matters, in support of House Bill (HB) 556 - Criminal Law - Drug Paraphernalia for Administration – Decriminalization. This bill will amend existing criminal law to remove certain items that could be used to consume drugs from what is considered “drug paraphernalia,” effectively decriminalizing possession of those items.

I came to develop Grey Matters, following my time as the Director of a Syringe Service Program (SSP) in Southwest Baltimore. Being on the borders of both Baltimore and Anne Arundel Counties, the program participants that I served were regularly facing legal risks as the response to legally obtained safer drug use equipment varies so greatly across the various jurisdictions. Providing sterile drug use equipment to people in our neighborhood; who in other social work settings were regularly met with stigma and shame; allowed me to have real conversations with my neighbors about reducing the harms associated with drug use, keeping people alive, connecting to resources, building relationships, and promoting autonomy, dignity and safety.

At times, this intense, life-saving work in the face of an opioid crisis was derailed by having to write letters of support for participants who were picked up by police for possession of legally acquired supplies. It was incredibly frustrating to have to stop tasks such as naloxone distribution, housing navigation, and community health event coordination to respond to a waste of public law enforcement time and money on detaining people for possession of drug use supplies- not to mention the emotional, social, financial and legal impacts on participants.

My previous role at the SSP, evolved from Outreach Coordinator to Director following the changes in service provision demanded by COVID-19. We shifted our focus from encouraging folks to navigate unreliable and unavailable transportation systems, to providing healthcare, harm reduction, and case management services at their door, while masked up and social distancing. In practice with drug use supplies, this also means that program participants went

from needing to carry their used syringes in flimsy bags like purses while standing on a potentially crowded bus, to then congregating at a program – to having their used syringes discreetly picked up from their homes and immediately placed in a puncture-resistant container. Our teams would also clean up the drug use litter that we would encounter in neighborhoods along the way. As a person who has been stuck by a used syringe, this seemingly small outcome from access to decriminalized supplies is very important to me.

The evolution to community-based services would not have been possible without the unpaid work of program participants offering secondary distribution to their friends and loved ones, who also use drugs and benefitted from access to the supplies and information that we offered. Getting those warm handoffs from trusted people was the primary way that we grew from 30 encounters in the first week to over 300 encounters per week over the first year of the pandemic. Making paraphernalia decriminalized would make it easier for SSP participants acting as the bridge, risking their own legal safety, to connect others to care through secondary distribution.

I believe that this bill will simplify Maryland's paraphernalia laws and clarify that possession of harm reduction supplies to prevent infectious diseases, soft tissue infections, wounds, and bloodborne illness is not a crime. It would reduce the burden on SSP staff and participants alike, by reducing the barriers created by variation in local jurisdiction enforcement, and improve access to various supports and wrap-around care for Marylanders statewide, via legal supply distribution connections. **We ask that the House Judiciary Committee give HB 556 a favorable report.**

For more information about Grey Matters, my work as a social worker, or this position, please contact me via email at katharinevans@gmail.com.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Katie Evans', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Katie Evans, LCSW-C