



February 11, 2025

House Judiciary Committee
House Bill 556 - Drug Paraphernalia for Administration - Decriminalization
FAVORABLE

Charm City Care Connection supports House Bill 556 (Criminal Law - Drug Paraphernalia for Administration - Decriminalization). HB556 will revise existing criminal law to remove items that could be used to consume drugs from what is considered drug paraphernalia, effectively decriminalizing possession of those items.

Founded in 2009, Charm City Care Connection (CCCC) is a community-based harm reduction drop-in center in East Baltimore. As a state authorized Syringe Service Program (SSP) and Overdose Response Program (ORP), we are on the front line of defense in providing support against overdose for the people most at risk in Baltimore City. We connect with people in the community who normally cannot access life-saving services in a traditional manner through regular outreach, with a primary focus on serving individuals who use drugs. We build ongoing relationships with our clients in a way that allows us to provide supportive counseling, referrals, and linkage to care. Our mission is to serve as a pathway to healthcare, low-barrier drug treatment, and other wrap-around services while upholding the dignity, respect, and agency of our clients.

As an authorized SSP, we are legally allowed to distribute sterile drug use supplies to our clients. The distribution of these items is an evidence-based practice proven to reduce the spread of infectious diseases. Unfortunately, the confusing nature of paraphernalia laws in Maryland prevents these health benefits from fully materializing. Unless you can prove you are a client of an authorized program, you are subject to arrest for possessing the same items given out for free by the 27 existing SSPs across the state of Maryland.

Proving you are an SSP client requires holding onto a paper identification card, similar to a business card, and advocating for yourself to law enforcement while displaying this card. For our clients, most of whom are unstably housed and have a history of incarceration, this process is challenging and traumatizing at best. As providers, all we can do is educate our clients on the law and the options they have to protect themselves, but cannot promise them it will be honored.

Our inability to ensure the safety of our clients from arrest for the service we are legally providing them is demoralizing. By decriminalizing paraphernalia, we can eliminate fear of arrest as a barrier to accessing and using our services and improve the ability of our providers to make a positive impact in our clients lives. **For these reasons and more, we ask that the House Judiciary Committee give HB556 a favorable report.**

For more information about Charm City Care Connection or this position, please contact Owen O'Keefe at ookeefe@charmcityclinic.org.