



February 11, 2025

**House Judiciary Committee
TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT**

HB 556 - Drug Paraphernalia for Administration- Decriminalization

Behavioral Health System Baltimore (BHSB) is a nonprofit organization that serves as the local behavioral health authority (LBHA) for Baltimore City. BHSB works to increase access to a full range of quality behavioral health (mental health and substance use) services and advocates for innovative approaches to prevention, early intervention, treatment and recovery for individuals, families, and communities. Baltimore City represents nearly 35 percent of the public behavioral health system in Maryland, serving over 100,000 people with mental illness and substance use disorders (collectively referred to as “behavioral health”) annually.

Behavioral Health System Baltimore strongly supports HB 556 - Drug Paraphernalia for Administration- Decriminalization. Decriminalizing the possession and use of drug paraphernalia would promote trust between harm reduction programs and people who use drugs while having a negligible impact on public safety. BHSB urges the General Assembly to join the Baltimore City Administration in supporting this legislation and to help Maryland use its scarce resources to save lives rather than punitive approaches such as arrest or prosecution for drug paraphernalia.

The number of overdose deaths in Maryland has skyrocketed in the last ten years. About 2,500 people died of fatal overdose in the state each year from 2018-2023, including close to 1,000 who died in Baltimore City.¹ And while there are some promising signs that overdose have peaked and are starting to decline, the state must continue to make preventing overdoses a top priority.

HB 556 is an important step in the direction of putting overdose prevention first. Harm reduction services such as syringe service programs are among the effective overdose prevention strategies. These programs help individuals to reduce the harm of using drugs but also help build trusting relationship that often lead to considering treatment and recovery. The potential for arrest or prosecution for drug paraphernalia that is being returned to a harm reduction program breaks that trust and discourages people who use drugs from engaging in the program. This pushes them further into the shadows and increases the likelihood of continued use, infectious disease transmission, and overdose. By eliminating that risk through decriminalizing drug paraphernalia, Maryland can help ensure harm reduction programs remain safe spaces for the people who use them and better direct our state’s law enforcement resources to improve public safety.

Decriminalizing paraphernalia will help prioritize overdose prevention over a carceral approach. **BHSB urges the House Judiciary Committee to support HB 556.**

For more information, please contact BHSB Policy Director Dan Rabbitt at 443-401-6142

Endnotes:

¹ MDH Overdose Data Portal, available at: <https://health.maryland.gov/dataoffice/Pages/mdh-dashboards.aspx>