

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

RE: SUPPORT of House Bill 0556
(Criminal Law - Drug Paraphernalia for Administration - Decriminalization) - FAVORABLE

Dear Chair Clippenger and House Judiciary Committee Members,

I have been working in harm reduction for almost my entire adult life, nearly 20 years. My support for this legislation can be summarized by the following two goals:

- Effectively support Marylanders who are seeking to better their lives by accessing appropriate evidence-based resources.
- Ensure that the staff who dedicate their lives to others by working at these resources are safe.

As the founder of one of Maryland's first authorized community-based Syringe Service Programs and the longest standing member of the state's official Advisory Board on the subject, I can tell you that the current law, as enacted today, undermines both of the above goals.

I'll give you an example of just one instance of how the current law did not allow me to effectively work with a client who was actively seeking support for his substance use disorder. When I was working at a Baltimore City harm reduction syringe service program I had a client frantically contact me because she and her boyfriend – both clients of ours – had been pulled over for a tail light being out. The police officer called for several more patrol cars and both clients were ordered to exit the vehicle and sit on the sidewalk.

Why had that initial officer called for more cars and about a dozen of his colleagues to respond to this minor traffic violation? Simply because he saw a sealed package of 10 insulin syringes on the backseat. The woman I was talking with had her syringe service program participant card with her but her boyfriend could not find his. Because he was driving he was arrested and detained in Baltimore City Detention Center for over 10 hours. He was released in the middle of the night, in the freezing cold.

We can all agree that there is significant stigma against people who use drugs, such that they often hide their drugs use and are reluctant to disclose the full spectrum of concerns in their lives to medical professionals, support services staff, and others. Being locked up with the threat of awaiting trial for carrying safety supplies was detrimental for their emotional health, ability and desire to trust professionals, not to mention puts people at greater risk for a whole host of health concerns if appointments are missed or carefully adhered to medication or care routines are disrupted.

If we're saying we want to encourage people at risk of fatal overdose to connect to resources then we need to hold up our end of the bargain and make it possible to consistently access evidence-based public health programs. This incident set us – as a provider of life-saving public health and medical services – back. It took quite a while to regain trust and build our relationship with them again. We are lucky that we were able to rebuild trust. For others that metaphorical door might have remained closed and we might have lost touch indefinitely.

Thank you for your careful attention to this matter. For questions please reach out to me, Harriet Smith MS, via email (harrietsmithbalt@gmail.com).