



ON OUR OWN
OF MARYLAND

onourownmd.org

7310 Esquire Court
Mailbox 14
Elkridge, MD 21075

410.540.9020

WRITTEN TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 551: Criminal Law - Drug Paraphernalia and Controlled Paraphernalia Prohibitions - Repeal

Thank you Chair Bartlett, Vice Chair Davis and committee members for your commitment to improving the quality and accessibility of healthcare services for Marylanders, especially community members who experience significant behavioral health challenges. On Our Own of Maryland (OOOMD) is a nonprofit behavioral health education and advocacy organization, operating for 30+ years by and for people with lived experience of mental health and substance use recovery. Our network of affiliated peer-run Wellness & Recovery Centers throughout the state offer free, voluntary recovery support services to 10,000 community members with mental health and substance use disorders.

OOOMD is in strong support of HB 551, which would repeal Maryland's drug paraphernalia law and end penalties for possession and distribution of paraphernalia. This will effectively decriminalize personal harm reduction practices (i.e. using sanitary supplies), which reduce the occurrence and transmission of infectious diseases such as HIV and Hepatitis C.

Since 2016, established Syringe Service Programs (SSPs) and their participants have been made exempt from the criminal offense of the possession of specific drug paraphernalia.¹ However, harm reduction program workers, family members, loved ones, and peers all put themselves at significant risk of being arrested when delivering or utilizing different types of supplies to help reduce health risks. Repealing Maryland's drug paraphernalia law would eliminate this barrier to live-saving care.

Public health research has shown SSPs to be effective in preventing the spread of infectious disease and increasing access to treatment² without increasing rates of drug use³ and other criminalized activity.⁴ In fact, 2025 CDC research shows that SSP participants are 5x more likely to enter treatment and 3x more likely to stop using drugs.⁵ There are 29 currently active SSPs across 20 counties in Maryland.⁶

¹ Public Health – Opioid-Associated Disease Prevention and Outreach Program (2016). SB0097 (CH0348)

² Fernandes RM, Cary M, Duarte G, et al. Effectiveness of needle and syringe programmes in people who inject drugs – An overview of systematic reviews. BMC Public Health. 2017;17(1):309. doi:10.1186/s12889-017-4210-2.

³ P. Lurie, A.L. Reingold, B. Bowser (eds). The Public Health Impact of Needle Exchange Programs in the United States and Abroad: Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations (1993)

⁴ Murphy, S., Kelley, M. S., & Lune, H. (2004). The health benefits of secondary syringe exchange. Journal of Drug Issues, 34(2), 245-268.

⁵ CDC, Syringe Service Programs (SSPs), 2025. Available at <https://restoredcdc.org/www.cdc.gov/syringe-services-programs/php/index.html>

⁶ <https://health.maryland.gov/phpa/Pages/Syringe-Services-Program.aspx>



On Our Own of Maryland - 2026 - HB 551- FAV (Drug Paraphernalia - Repeal)

The threat of law enforcement involvement and/or incarceration based on paraphernalia laws creates fear and stigma that deters community members from engaging with these low/no barrier healthcare programs. Our network of peer-run Wellness & Recovery Centers serves people with significant substance use, mental health and co-occurring health challenges across Maryland, including in Washington County, Frederick County, Carroll County, Harford County, and Baltimore City. We've heard from individuals who will not participate in Baltimore City Needle Exchange Program due to the very real fear of being arrested and forced through the traumatizing experience of detoxing in jail instead of in a treatment setting.

Across the US, 20 states have already taken steps toward decriminalization of personal harm reduction supplies (i.e. possession of syringes for personal use). Eliminating penalties for paraphernalia in Maryland is essential to expanding harm reduction programs and practices that help keep our communities safer and healthier. **HB 551 is life-saving legislation and we urge a favorable report.** Thank you!