



HEALTH CARE FOR THE HOMELESS TESTIMONY
FAVORABLE

**HB 551 – Criminal Law - Drug Paraphernalia and Controlled Paraphernalia Prohibitions –
Repeal**

House Judiciary Committee
February 10, 2026

Health Care for the Homeless strongly supports HB 551, which would repeal Maryland’s paraphernalia and controlled paraphernalia laws. This bill would importantly mean: there would be no State penalties for paraphernalia; no one would be legally stopped, arrested, or charged based on paraphernalia alone; and items that are obtained legally would remain legal. This bill will save lives, reduce barriers to housing and employment, and prevent the spread of infectious diseases. Ending all paraphernalia penalties is a proven, cost-free way to improve health and public safety statewide.

As a Federally Qualified Health Center serving over 11,000 of Maryland’s most vulnerable individuals each year, we see firsthand the effects of criminalizing substance use, particularly on communities of color. The criminalization of substance use and paraphernalia perpetuates homelessness and prevents individuals from seeking supportive services. When there is less fear of punishment or arrest by police, individuals feel safer accessing treatment.¹ By decriminalizing paraphernalia and implementing harm reduction principles, individuals are more inclined to carry and use life-saving supplies—such as sterile needles and safer smoking kits—that prevent overdose deaths and the spread of infectious diseases.² The continued toll of opioid overdose deaths and related harms both warrants and necessitates decriminalization of paraphernalia. In addition to saving lives, this has enormous implications for lowering healthcare costs related to treating infectious diseases, like HIV.³

Maryland is falling behind other states. 20 states have decriminalized syringe possession for personal use. Minnesota has fully repealed paraphernalia penalties, and Alaska has never criminalized paraphernalia.⁴ Maryland’s paraphernalia laws are outdated, cruel, and ineffective. This bill rightly recognizes that Maryland’s paraphernalia law incentivizes unsafe behaviors that harm people who use drugs, first responders, business owners, families, and neighborhoods. As a health provider that sees how crucial and life-saving harm reduction and decriminalization are for the clients we serve, **Health Care for the Homeless strongly urges the Committee to issue a favorable report on HB 551.**

¹ Laura Vearrier, *The Value of Harm Reduction for Injection Drug Use: A Clinical and Public Health Ethics Analysis*, Disease-a-Month 65, no. 5 (May 2019), pp. 119–41, available at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.disamonth.2018.12.002>.

² See U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, *Effectiveness of Syringe Service Programs, 2023*, available at <https://www.hsrd.research.va.gov/publications/esp/syringeservice.cfm>.

³ David Wilson, et al., *The cost-effectiveness of harm reduction*, International Journal of Drug Policy 26, supp. 1 (February 2015), pp. S5-S11, available at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2014.11.007>.

⁴ Public Health Law Network, *Harm Reduction Legal Project* (2025).

Health Care for the Homeless is Maryland's leading provider of integrated health services and supportive housing for individuals and families experiencing homelessness. We deliver medical care, mental health services, state-certified addiction treatment, dental care, social services, housing support services, and housing for over 11,000 Marylanders annually at sites in Baltimore City and Baltimore County.

Our Vision: Everyone is healthy and has a safe home in a just and respectful community.

Our Mission: We work to end homelessness through racially equitable health care, housing and advocacy in partnership with those of us who have experienced it.

For more information, visit www.hchmd.org.