

My name is Katharine Evans. I am writing to gain your support for Overdose Prevention Sites (OPS) today, both as a licensed social worker, and as a service coordinator for people who use drugs in Southwest Baltimore. I am part of the team at SPARC, which is a harm reduction drop-in center for non-men. Since the advent of COVID-19, we now focus on delivering supplies and services to folks 4 days per week and our team is encountering up to 175 people per week.

At SPARC, we provide people with tools to use drugs more safely and during these interactions we can have conversations with people about their drug use that few else are having. These conversations prevent soft tissue infections, blood infections and frequently also reduce the rate of injection by alternating routes of administration. Many of the people that we serve are experiencing extreme resource scarcity that is exacerbated by the pandemic. Due to participation in our more informal economies, many also do not qualify for relief programs. This means that we are seeing an increase in folks using drugs in unsafe spaces like alleys, bus stops, and abandoned houses. Our present void of safe spaces also contributes to the fact that Maryland's opioid using population is not engaged in treatment. SAMSHA estimated that of Maryland residents with illicit drug dependence, less than 12% receive treatment. Overdose Prevention Sites are an evidence-based, effective way to dramatically improve drug user health and save lives. OPS are proven to engage with people who are at heightened risk for infectious disease and overdose and a proven strategy to reduce HIV and Hepatitis C risk behavior.

If we were able to add a community run Overdose Prevention Site, at site like SPARC, we could prevent a significant number of overdose deaths. No one has ever died at an overdose prevention site. Yet here in Baltimore, we are constantly mourning the losses of life to overdose. After a Canadian facility opened, they found that overdose mortality dropped 35% in the area surrounding the facility. We could provide that longevity for residents of Pigtown, Curtis Bay and Brooklyn. Preservation of stigma is the only cause left standing in the way of implementing Overdose Prevention Site care. Imagine how many futures would be preserved if you make the choice for safety over stigma.