



November 24, 2020

Dear Baltimore City Council Health Committee:

Voices of Hope of Maryland is a proud member of the BRIDGES Coalition for Overdose Prevention Sites (OPS) and supports today's informational hearing on OPS, with hopes that Baltimore City Council will again lead our state in innovative solutions to public health crises. BRIDGES advocates for the legal authorization of community-run and peer-run overdose prevention sites to reduce overdose deaths, which continue to occur at unprecedented levels in Baltimore City and across Maryland.

Voices of Hope, Inc. is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization made of people in recovery, family members and allies who support recovery in Maryland. Our mission is to advocate for behavioral health disorder prevention, intervention, treatment and recovery resources, eliminate the stigma of addiction through events and education, and support all pathways of recovery.

In Maryland, drug and alcohol related intoxication deaths increased in 2018 for the eighth year in a row, reaching a staggering 2,406 fatalities. And while deaths related to heroin and prescription opioids have trended downward in recent years, fentanyl-related deaths have continued to rise (up 42% from 2016-2017, and up another 18% from 2017-2018). With the constant year to year increase in these numbers, it's critical to remember that in 2012, there were only 29 deaths from fentanyl. 2018 saw 1,888 such deaths, more than 65 times larger than the 2012 number.

We urge Baltimore City Council's Health Committee to support Maryland General Assembly to authorize overdose and infectious disease prevention services, a proven intervention used across the globe to decrease overdose deaths. Maryland legislators have taken laudable steps to reduce the devastation of the overdose crisis, but they do not go far enough to halt the overdose epidemic. For five years, advocates have proposed legislation urging the General Assembly to authorize OPS, and we will bring the legislation to Annapolis again in 2021.

The proposed Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program mirrors more than 150 such programs already established across the world. More than 60 cities in 12 countries operate such programs, and numerous studies demonstrate the positive impacts. There is an abundance of evidence from Canada and various European countries showing that overdose prevention facilities reduce health concerns and public order issues by reaching those

most at risk of overdose who may otherwise use in public or semi-public locations. The programs are intended for those who are most marginalized including people who are homeless, people with mental health concerns, and street-based sex workers who use drugs. Many of these individuals live in poverty, with limited access to housing and other basic needs.

Overdose prevention service locations serve as an access point to substance use treatment and other health and social services. Far from encouraging drug use, overdose prevention sites help people reduce their use of drugs and enter a number of helpful services. Referrals to behavioral health services are particularly important, because it is often difficult for participants to access this treatment independently.

As a community-based organization that provides essential harm reduction services to people who use drugs, Voices of Hope of Maryland would proudly provide overdose prevention supervision services if legally authorized.

Baltimore City could move the state of Maryland towards this life-saving decision. Thank you again for holding this important informational hearing and we look forward to next steps.

Thank you,

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