

HB1516 - UNFAVORABLE

February 23, 2020

To whom it may concern:

As a professional who has been treating those with substance use disorders in Washington County for over 30 years, I am becoming increasingly concerned that our legislators who are elected to serve all the county's residents are blocking treatment and therapeutic opportunities for those with substance use disorders. Substance use disorder is a chronic disorder of the brain that is strongly influenced by genetic, environmental and social factors. It is treatable but as the individual reduces the use of substances, they experience intense symptoms of withdrawal and depression, which increases risk of relapse.

Washington County was granted the funding for a 24-hour crisis center for those with mental health conditions or substance use disorders. This would have provided services directly to those folks by professionals and would have decreased the numbers who are regularly served in our emergency room. It is my understanding that certain local legislators blocked this available service.

Now, Delegate Parrott is introducing legislation to suspend syringes services in Washington County. These services are researched based, as are all Harm Reduction services. By providing clean syringes to those with substance use disorders, we reduce the transmission of HIV, Hepatitis C, and other diseases transmitted by blood transfer. In addition, we also bring these folks into a supportive environment where they can meet and become acquainted with therapeutic support and treatment staff so that they can build healthy relationships. Using knowledge of the change process, these staff members help the individual to build motivation to change and become knowledgeable of the treatment resources available to them.

Prior to my retirement from the Washington County Health Department 5 years ago, I had the honor to be on the ground floor of several new and innovative programs in this county to address substance use disorders. All the programs developed were evidenced based and research driven. For example, the county initiated one of the first three jail-based treatment programs nationwide with the cooperation of local law enforcement, the judiciary, treatment professionals and very active legislators who actively sought monies for this program. Since that time, this program has been replicated in county detention centers nationwide. This county has always been on the cutting edge of data and research driven programs to address the damage done by substance use disorders. When new research was developed the county developed new programs. Harm reduction services is the current example. It is evidenced based, and data driven. The county has a many professional therapists and counselors, peer support and harm reduction staff at the Health Department, Meritus Medical System and other programs around the county. These folks provide a healthy network, resources, education, and work with families and yes distribute syringes, but this is only a small portion of what they do. I count myself as a proud member of this group and I can tell you that we would welcome the day when we no longer have a job.

I continue to work providing services to those with co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders at another agency. I can tell you that you cannot treat people you do not meet. Harm reduction services bring these folks in the door, where trust and relationships can be built. I can also tell you that not everyone gets well and not everyone survives and I deeply mourn all those I have lost, but I cannot stop trying.

Sincerely,

Donna Fogle LCADC, LCSW-C