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Prince George's and  
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*Vice Chair*

Health and Government  
Operations Committee

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Government Operations and  
Long Term Care

Chair, Public Health and  
Minority Health Disparities



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**House Bill 396 – Public Health –  
Overdose & Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program**

**Testimony of Delegate Joseline A. Peña-Melnyk (Favorable)**

Chairman Pendergrass and fellow members of the Health and Government Operations Committee, I am pleased to present House Bill (HB) 396, the Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program.

The opioid epidemic has taken the lives of thousands across the country but is disproportionately taking the lives of Marylanders. We are home to the city with the highest overdose fatality rate in the United States: Baltimore.

This is not just a problem in the cities. By the end of the first quarter of 2020, every single jurisdiction in Maryland saw loss of life due to overdose.

Globally, there are about 120 overdose prevention sites in 10 countries, including Canada. There has not been a single death at any of these sites. Additionally, in Vancouver, the community surrounding the overdose prevention site saw lower crime rates. Mounting evidence supports that overdose prevention sites reduce overdose deaths and are cost-effective. Alarming, the COVID-19 pandemic may be increasing rates of drug use and increasing risk of overdose. It is imperative that we act fast to limit the impact of the pandemic on our opioid epidemic.

Learning from our history, we know that criminalization of addiction and drug use increases stigma and discrimination. Right now, we have the opportunity to address the opioid epidemic as a public health crisis and reduce the number of lives lost to addiction. Overdose prevention sites are an innovative solution that will reduce mortality in our communities.

HB 396 would prevent overdose deaths and transmission of diseases while providing resources and access to services by allowing for the implementation of six overdose and infectious disease prevention services programs. To be clear, **this bill is not a mandate**. This bill enables communities that want an overdose prevention site to create one after an application is approved by the Maryland Department of Health and the local health department.

Our neighbors dying from overdose are commonly dying in isolated areas with no one around to provide life-saving intervention such as Naloxone. Prevention services programs would provide a safe place for someone to use the drugs they had previously obtained and brought with them to the site. Drugs will **never** be provided to citizens for illicit use. We are just giving them a safe place to use the drugs they already have and plan to use in the presence of someone who can save their life.

Trained staff members would provide sterile equipment to drug users at no cost. Trained personnel would distribute clean materials, and provide referrals to treatment and information to users. Evidence supports that this would lead to reductions in diseases commonly transmitted during needle sharing, such as Hepatitis C and HIV.

This bill has been introduced for several years in the Maryland General Assembly without success. Overdose deaths in Maryland have been increasing during the COVID-19 pandemic. We must commit to saving these lives.

Now is the time for us to act. These sites are safe. We have the responsibility to protect the lives of our citizens. Every overdose death was preventable. Every life lost could still be here today. We can and we must do better by those in our community who are facing addiction. Thank you for the opportunity to present House Bill 396. I respectfully request a favorable report.