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TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF
HB396: Public Health - Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program
Health and Government Operations Committee - House of Delegates

March 11, 2021

Thank you, Madam Chair Pendergrass, Vice Chair Pena-Melynk, and committee members for your dedication to improving the quality and accessibility of healthcare services for Marylanders. On Our Own of Maryland is a statewide behavioral health (BH) peer education and advocacy organization. Our network of 23 affiliated peer-run Wellness & Recovery Centers located throughout the state offer comprehensive, voluntary recovery support services, free of charge, to community members with BH challenges, including substance use disorders (SUD). We are writing to share our strong support of HB396, which would authorize the creation of 6 Overdose Prevention Sites (OPS) in areas throughout the state where overdose deaths are occurring at disproportionately high levels.

OPS will provide a safe site for people living with SUD to self-administer drugs, while in the presence of doctors, nurses, and counselors who can test drugs for lethal amounts of fentanyl, provide clean syringes, and intervene with reversal medication (naloxone) in the case of an overdose. Moreover, OPS clinicians and case managers will connect individuals to treatment services (e.g. testing and referrals for HIV, Hepatitis C, and other medical issues), recovery coaching, and wraparound services such as housing assistance and social services.

A former staff member of one of our Wellness & Recovery Centers shared with us how significant and transformational it was for her to be able to access non-stigmatizing harm-reduction services during her own recovery journey from opiate use. For nearly 10 years, she utilized the Needle Exchange Bus in Baltimore at least once a month where she was able to access clean needles, trained medical staff that could intervene in the case of an emergency, and be connected to treatment. She spoke of how important it is for services to be provided without judgement or instilling fear. In her words, "to be looked at like a human is amazing. Their only goal is to help you. At some point, someone in my life told me I was worthy and that I deserved to live a better life, and that was when I realized I could."

Marylanders are dying of overdose deaths at unprecedented rates. From January to September of last year, 1,829 Marylanders died of an opioid related overdose, a 14.5% jump from this time last year. Fentanyl played a lethal role in an alarming 93% of these deaths.¹ SUDs are still heavily stigmatized, despite evidence that addiction is a medical disease. This stigma can lead to dire consequences, preventing individuals from seeking the care they need due to shame or fear, and increasing the risk of relapse and overdose deaths. We cannot wait any longer to reduce the barriers to receiving treatment, and we must invest in effective, community-based harm reduction strategies that individuals can afford and easily access. OPS would provide those struggling with substance use with the opportunity to form trusting relationships with clinicians who have expert understanding of the science of addiction, provide competent medical care without stigma or shame, and actively promote the possibility of recovery.

As an organization, we strongly urge the committee to vote in favor of this important bill.

¹ 2020, *Maryland Opioid Operational Command Center Quarterly Report January 1, 2020 – March 31, 2020.*