



Testimony before Health and Government Operations Committee  
\*\*Support\*\*

HB 396 – Public Health – Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program

March 11, 2021

Maryland’s Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW – MD), which represents professional social workers across the state, supports HB 396 – Public Health – Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program.

HB 396 would establish an Overdose and Infections Disease Prevention Services Program through community-based organizations, requiring approval and oversight through the Maryland Department of Health to reduce opioid-related deaths in Maryland.

As social workers, we help meet the needs of – and empower – all people, with particular attention to those who are vulnerable, oppressed, and in poverty.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, we are living in a precarious time where a great deal of people fall into these categories. With income inequality greater than any time since before the great depression, many people are dying from what are referred to as “diseases of despair,” including from substances.<sup>2</sup> Those people are worthy of help.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on opioid abuse and opioid-related deaths in Maryland and across the United States. Between January 2020 and June 2020, there was a 9.1% increase in fatal drug overdoses and alcohol-related deaths, 90% of which resulted from opioid use. The Maryland Department of Health and the Maryland Opioid Operational Command Center confirmed that the pandemic is and has been exacerbating addictions, particularly due to social isolation, disruption of support, restricted access to care, and economic distress.<sup>3</sup>

While it is often said that addiction does not discriminate, data shows that those without a stable income are more likely to face addiction. Addiction rates are twice as high in unemployed persons than those who are employed.<sup>4</sup> The US Department of Health and Human Services has also reported that Medicaid recipients are more likely to be prescribed opioids at higher doses and longer durations.<sup>5</sup>

Overdose Prevention Sites are both efficacious and in demand. Studies have found Overdose Prevention Sites [OPS’] to reduce the number of overdose deaths and transmission rates of infectious diseases without increasing drug trafficking or crime in the relevant areas.<sup>6</sup> A recent Johns Hopkins study found that 77% of those surveyed, including those in Baltimore, said they would use such sites if they were available.<sup>7</sup> No one likes the idea of excessive drug use, but what about the idea of preventable deaths? What about all the tax dollars we spend treating overdoses? Safe consumption sites have been shown to save lives and tax dollars.

For substance users who want to seek help, a life of substance use is often not conducive to our Western model of health care. While yes, people are going there to consume substances safely, they can also get some immediate health assistance, such as getting wound care. They can often also get referrals to help in the community.

For these reasons, **we urge a favorable report on HB 396.**

Respectfully,

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<sup>1</sup>National Association of Social Workers, (n.d.). *Code of Ethics*. Retrieved from <https://www.socialworkers.org/about/ethics/code-of-ethics/code-of-ethics-english>

<sup>2</sup>Harvard Law, (2018, July 22). *Introduction to "Diseases of despair: The role of policy and law."*

<https://blog.petrieflom.law.harvard.edu/2018/07/22/diseases-of-despair-the-role-of-policy-and-law/>

<sup>3</sup>The Washington Post, (2020, September 23). *Overdose and alcohol-related deaths rising during pandemic.*

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/overdoses-and-alcohol-related-deaths-rising-during-pandemic/2020/09/23/1c96d684-fd9e-11ea-b0e4-350e4e60cc91story.html>

<sup>4</sup>Addiction Center, (2020, December 8). *How does addiction impact low-income Americans?* <https://www.addictioncenter.com/addiction/low-income-americans/>

<sup>5</sup>National Institute on Drug Abuse, (2017, October 25). *Addressing the opioid crisis means confronting socioeconomic disparities.*

<https://www.drugabuse.gov/about-nida/noras-blog/2017/10/addressing-opioid-crisis-means-confronting-socioeconomic-disparities>

<sup>6</sup>American Medical Association, (2017, June 12). *AMA wants new approaches to combat synthetic and injectable drugs.* <https://www.ama-assn.org/press-center/press-releases/ama-wants-new-approaches-combat-synthetic-and-injectable-drugs>

<sup>7</sup>The Baltimore Sun, (2019, June 5). *Opioid users in Baltimore and elsewhere say they would use designated sites to consume drugs.*

<http://www.baltimoresun.com/health/bs-hs-safe-consumption-spaces-20190605-story.html>

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