

Written Testimony in Support of HB 396

I am Deborah Agus. I am the Executive Director of the Behavioral Health Leadership Institute ["BHLI"] and I am writing to support

BHLI has been providing low-threshold Buprenorphine treatment for Opioid Use Disorder based on harm reduction models for over 15 years. We believe medication-based treatment is effective and valuable.

However, we also believe in saving lives and promoting the health and welfare of all citizens suffering from Opioid Use Disorder. Every individual deserves the dignity to live a healthy and fulfilling life regardless of their health choices. Every individual has the potential to add value to our community. We must promote health and choice for all in a comprehensive and high quality health care system.

OPS center are vital to creating this system. There is no greater health and equity tool to provide a safe and healthy space for people. This is not a promotion of use but is a lifeline while someone is making that choice. There is no choice.

The alternative to OPS is death by overdose and the continued spreading of deadly diseases such as HIV and Hepatitis C not to mention the dehumanization and degradation that are offshoots of our current approach. Many individuals would be offered the choice to engage in health care treatment, receive support for food and shelter and learn about treatment alternatives while engaging at the OPS.

Organizations like BHLI which currently provide high-quality accessible treatment would be partners and would have staff available to educate, link to health care and also to provide an opportunity to "try out" medication for those who are interested. Research and experience have demonstrated that people often need to try alternatives over time before deciding on a new path. With OPS, we could build a strong, comprehensive and humane health care life-line.

While the federal law is not yet certain, the States must create the impetus for change and begin to develop the programs that will lead the way.

The choice is clear. The time is now. We must create a humane and equitable system of care beginning with Overdose Prevention Sites as part of a harm reduction continuum of care.

BHLI looks forward to working together with all Marylander on this paradigm shift towards an equitable, high-quality health care system.

Thank you for all you do,

Deborah Agus, JD
Executive Director BHLI
Adjunct Associate Professor, JHSPH

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