OVERDOSE PREVENTION SITES AS A METHOD OF EXPLOITATION AND VIOLENCE PREVENTION

MARYLAND VOLUNTEER LAWYERS SERVICE

UNIVERSITY OF BALTIMORE School of Law

Harm Reduction: What is It?

Harm reduction is a philosophical and political movement focused on shifting power and resources to the people most vulnerable to structural violence. According to the National Harm Reduction Coalition, it includes strategies based upon several principles, including:

- Recognizing that the realities of poverty, class, racism, social isolation, past trauma, sex-and gender-based discrimination, and other social inequalities affect both people's vulnerability to and capacity for effectively dealing with drug-related harm;
- Accepting that legal and illegal drug use is a part of our world, and that we choose to work to minimize its harmful effects rather than ignore or condemn usage and users;
- Ensuring that people who use drugs have a voice in the creation of programs and policies designed to serve them, recognizing that they are the primary agents of reducing the harms of their drug use; and,
- Calling for the non-judgmental, non-coercive provision of services and resources to people who use drugs and the communities in which they live to assist them in reducing attendant harm.

At the institutional level, harm reduction shifts organizations, systems, and broader culture to be safer for both individuals and communities – focusing on how we can increase safety by improving the context in which drug use and sex work take place, as opposed to risk reduction, which focuses on tools and services to reduce potential harm.

OVERDOSE PREVENTION SITES: WHAT ARE THEY AND WHY ARE THEY NEEDED?

Drug overdose is a leading cause of death in the United States. In public testimony to the Maryland House of Delegates' Health and Government Operations Committee, a representative from the BRIDGES Coalition for Overdoes Prevention Sites wrote "17,000 Marylanders have been lost to fatal overdoses." In her written testimony to the same Committee, Meredith Zoltick, Nurse Practitioner with the University of Maryland School of Medicine's Institute on Human Virology stated that in 2022, more than 2,400 Marylanders died from overdoses, and the risk of overdose is increasing. Overdose Prevention Sites were designed to lessen the risk of overdose that drug users face, which is compounded by the stigma surrounding drug use and the criminalization of it.

Overdose Prevention Sites (OPS), also known as Supervised Consumption Services (SCS), Supervised Injection Facilities (SIFs), Supervised Injection Sites (SIS), Drug Consumption Rooms (DRCs), or Overdose Prevention Centers (OPC), are semi-private spaces for people to use drugs while designated staff supervise. The centers have clean, sterile tools for users, as well as oxygen, Narcan, and other emergency supplies. Sites also commonly provide additional services, including meals, case management, health care, and social activities.

OPS staff provide medical advice and referrals to social support programs but do not consume drugs or provide illegal drugs to clients. There are nearly 200 centers in 14 countries, including Canada and the U.S. **Importantly, there has not been a single overdose fatality at any OPC worldwide.**

HOW OVERDOSE PREVENTION SITES MAY HELP REDUCE VIOLENCE AND EXPLOITATION

Research shows that OPS provide a safe space, particularly for women and non-binary persons who take drugs and are disproportionally vulnerable to violence. With regard to the crime of human trafficking, the opioid crisis has also contributed to an increased risk of exploitation, given that opioid use is both a common predictor of, and a reaction to, this horrific crime.

- Many trafficking survivors report self-medicating to cope with past trauma and were trafficked as a direct result of their addiction, while those who have survived a trafficking experience often begin using substances as a means to cope with what has happened to them. Of those who are actively being trafficked, a survey of U.S. survivors of sex trafficking survivors found that 84.3 percent used substances during their trafficking experience. Regardless of when and for what reason a survivors' substance use begins, using drugs puts them at heightened risk for re-exploitation or an initial trafficking experience simply because they are looking for a safe place to use there they do not have to rely on a potential trafficker for this assistance.
- A 2019 qualitative study of individuals at an OPS in Toronto, Canada reports that sites provide shelter, protection from street violence, safety from overdose, information on services and referrals, and are safe spaces for women.
- Women and non-binary persons who use drugs face many gendered complications that increase vulnerability and contribute to higher levels of harm. A 2020 study from Vancouver, Canada shows that OPS reduce the risk of predatory violence and create a safe space for women to assert agency over their drug use.
- A 2020 study of female sex workers in Baltimore City, MD reports that those sex workers most likely to use OPS were those who identified as sexual minorities, as well as those who were housing unstable, injected drugs, or had experienced sexual violence.

RESOURCES

- 2023 MD General Assembly Session – HB 0953/SB 0618 - Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program, See testimony from a wide range of supporters, including Dr. Susan Sherman, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Jessica Emerson, the HTPP Director, the Mental Health Association of Maryland, and Rajani Gudlavalleti, the Director of Mobilization at the Baltimore Harm Reduction Coalition.
- The BRIDGES Coalition OPS Fact Sheet provides an overview of OPS services and discusses the status of OPS approval in Maryland.
- Maryland Harm Reduction Advocacy Network (MHRAN) meets monthly and offers opportunities to network with harm reductionists in the area. Contact Owen@BaltimoreHarmReduction.org for information.

This tip sheet was created as a part of the Human Trafficking Prevention Project (HTPP),
a collaboration between the University of Baltimore School of Law and the
Maryland Volunteer Lawyers Service (MVLS).

Definitions and principles on this tip sheet are adapted from the National Harm Reduction Coalition
and the HTPP webinar: *"Overdose Prevention Sites as a Method of Exploitation and Violence Prevention"*
featuring guest presenters Rajani Gudlavalleti and Candy Kerr of the Baltimore Harm Reduction Coalition (BHRC),
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