

Written testimony: H.222 (an act relating to reducing overdoses)

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Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony today on behalf of the VT Syringe Service Programs (SSPs).

Funding for Syringe Service Programs

Vermont CARES, AIDS Project of Southern VT, HIV/HCV Resource Center, and Safe Recovery, together, serve the entire state with onsite and mobile service programs. These organizations have built sustainable infrastructures, programming, policies, community partnerships and, most importantly, trusting relationships within the populations we serve. It has taken a combined effort and more than 30 years to build these programs and networks that save lives every day.

Together, we have expanded access to harm reduction services to all 14 counties of the state by working with a fixed site and mobile service model. We are now reaching some of the most rural areas through robust mobile delivery programs, peer outreach workers and community partnerships. Mobile services are available in addition to the expansive offerings at fixed-site locations and in some regions mobile programs have taken the place of traditional onsite, drop-in locations, like H2RC for instance.

The SSPs have been an integral part of harm reduction services in Vermont for decades. The size and scope of Vermont's SSPs has been growing in response to the need. We are all acutely aware that we must continue to build upon the infrastructure that exists to address the health and wellness of people who use drugs.

In lieu of coming back tomorrow to talk about the budget, I would just like to say that, in the FY 2024 budget in the House, we had requested an extra \$400,000 to be divided equally between the four SSP programs, which was not funded. These funds are critical as the opioid overdose crisis continues and more lives are lost. Each of our programs operates with a very small number of staff while desperately trying to reach more people in need, especially in our under-resourced rural communities. We are all distributing a higher number of supplies and are struggling to meet those needs with the current funding. These funds will go to support staffing, syringes, and other reduction supplies.

Overdose Prevention and Drug-Checking for Contaminants

I would like to implore you to add the language from Section 14 of S.119 (a public health response to drug use) to H.222.. Section 14 addresses overdose prevention and drug-checking for Contaminants.

There seems to be broad support for on-site community drug checking. but to safely provide this service we need the provision for immunity passed. This will protect people who seek out and

utilize on-site community drug checking around the state. Giving people the ability to bring in samples of drugs to be tested without fear of criminalization is paramount for this work.

On-site drug checking tests for a wide spectrum of chemical compounds and people receive immediate results. This service will no doubt decrease deaths and increase awareness about what is in the drug supply. The protection under this law will extend to the staff and agencies providing these services.

This is a public health approach to saving lives, very much like immunity provided by the Good Samaritan law. As a state, we currently support and provide widespread drug checking with the use of fentanyl test strips – Vermont CARES was the first to pilot this test technology back in 2016. Fentanyl Test Strips have become a recognized harm reduction strategy since then. While these test strips are useful and have served a purpose in our communities, the technology is outdated and extremely limited in the information it can provide. Only 10 analogs of fentanyl can be identified with a test strip. This leads to a higher percentage of incorrect results, and they do not provide information on other harmful chemicals such as Xylazine or the potency of chemicals such as fentanyl. We also know that more dangerous, highly potent synthetic opioids are entering the drug supply as analogs of fentanyl are banned and become harder to obtain. We need to be moving with the trends and doing our best to stay one step ahead.

We must ensure protection under the law so that we can bring this life saving service to Vermonters who use drugs. The people we work with are asking for this, we know they will use it, and it will save lives right now, not a year from now. We are ready to implement this strategy as soon as these protections are in place and with the recommended appropriations.