



H. 72 : An Act Relating to a Harm-Reduction Criminal Justice Response to Drug Use

Written Testimony

Senate Health and Welfare

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Planned Parenthood Northern New England and Planned Parenthood Vermont Action Fund

Planned Parenthood of Northern New England provides comprehensive reproductive and sexual health care to more than 16,000 people in Vermont at seven health centers located in Burlington, Williston, St. Johnsbury, Barre, White River Junction, Rutland, and Brattleboro and virtually through our telehealth program. People turn to PPNNE for affordable, high-quality care including wellness exams, birth control, sexually transmitted infections testing and treatment, cancer screenings, abortion care, as well as a variety of limited primary care services. We see everyone who comes to us regardless of their ability to pay, and 54% of our patients have low incomes (defined as less than twice the Federal Poverty level). Last fiscal year, we provided \$802,000 in free and discounted care to our communities in Vermont.

Sexual and reproductive health care providers play a unique role in the state's health care system. We see all patients regardless of their ability to pay and are an integral part of the state's safety net. We provide time sensitive care, reserving time on our schedule each day for same-day appointments because much of our care begins with addressing an acute need - a patient's birth control prescription is about to expire, they felt a lump in their breast, they are experiencing painful periods, or they are worried they have an infection. Patients also turn to Planned Parenthood for primary care services, such as blood pressure checks, anemia testing, and screenings for cholesterol, diabetes, and thyroid. We are often the first and only health care provider a patient may see in a year due to the patient being uninsured or having a low income.

At PPNNE, we fully support H. 72 and the proposal to open Overdose

Prevention Centers in Vermont. Overdose Prevention Centers (OPCs) are a critical piece in a larger puzzle of the system of care and prevention in Vermont and one that is sorely missing right now. OPCs can often be a bridge to treatment and recovery

services for individuals and they also provide a lifesaving place to support individuals when they need it most.

As part of the intake process, PPNNE screens patients for mental health, safety and intimate partner violence, substance use disorders, and other social and mental determinants of health. Because of the unique relationship we have with our patient population, patients are much more likely to disclose these deeply personal health issues to our staff. When patients do disclose substance use, we have Patient Support Counselors on staff who can aid them in getting established with a specialized substance use provider. When completing her work with the Patient Support Counselor, one Vermont patient stated, "I do not think I could have done this alone, I am so grateful you were there to catch me when I was ready and that you were there to hold me accountable in taking the steps to get better".

At PPNNE, we support the health and well-being of all our patients on their terms, according to what they determine is best for themselves. When patients do not want to be connected to substance use providers or are not yet ready to stop using substances, Patient Support Counselors provide evidence-based support through a harm reduction framework. They can provide education and resources on how to minimize infection risks, and where to get clean needles, Narcan, or testing kits.

Despite being able to access trained mental health professionals in a medical setting that patients trust to be non-judgmental and trauma informed, many patients continue to feel the stigma associated with substance use or fear that they will be pressured to change and so do not follow up with our support counselors. OPCs would provide a unique space that would be able to meet Vermonters who are actively using where they are at and provide care and options in a more accessible environment. When asked how having OPCs would impact their work, one Patient Support Counselor commented, "I think Overdose Protection Centers would be very helpful to our patients. Not only would our patients be able to use substances in spaces that are safer for them, but they could more easily connect to social determinants of health that could reduce use in a non-judgmental space."

The non-judgmental and compassionate care provided by individuals is an essential component to the success of any substance use intervention and as such, it is critical that OPC staff and volunteers are shielded from criminal or civil liability. We strongly support the recommended liability protection language proposed by the Vermont Medical Society to strengthen protections for staff at OPCs.



Thank you for your consideration and support of this critically important legislation.

Planned Parenthood of Northern New England (PPNNE) is the largest provider of reproductive and sexual health care across the state of Vermont. We serve **patients** through 7 health centers in St. Johnsbury, Rutland, Brattleboro, Barre, Burlington, Williston, and White River Junction and virtually through our Telehealth program. Last year we saw more than 16,000 patients at these sites. **PPNNE was named a 2021 Guardian of Excellence Award® winner** by **Press Ganey**, the national leader in health care consumer and workforce engagement. Press Ganey recognizes PPNNE as a top-performing health care organization, achieving the 95th percentile or above for performance in patient experience, out of more than 20,000 medical practices.

Planned Parenthood Vermont Action Fund (PPVTAF) is an independent, not for profit organization formed as the advocacy and political arm of Planned Parenthood of Northern New England in Vermont. The Action Fund engages in educational and electoral activity, including voter registration, grassroots organizing and legislative advocacy.