

Dear Chair Lyons, Vice Chair Weeks and Committee Members:

I am writing on behalf of Vermonters for Criminal Justice Reform (VCJR) in strong support of H.72 and the establishment of overdose prevention centers in Vermont.

VCJR operates a re-entry and recovery center for justice involved people with substance use disorders. We are currently serving over 250 people from 8 counties across the state. About 82% have our clients have experienced a serious overdose. People with substance use disorders are at far greater risk than ever before. Fentanyl has largely replaced heroin and dramatically increased overdose risk. Xylazine contamination is leading to serious skin ulcers and wounds that often lead to life threatening infections like sepsis and endocarditis. We need new strategies to respond to the changing crisis. Overdose prevention centers are a necessary next step.

Most people who experience a fatal overdose in Vermont die alone. We talk to people every day about the risks of using alone. But many people, especially those who are unhoused, report that they often find themselves using alone because they don't have a viable alternative. They are struggling to survive a chronic health disorder characterized by compulsive drug use. Recovery is a process that takes place over time. The recovery process almost always includes periods of use/relapse. To be effective, we have to help people stay safe throughout their recovery process --especially during periods of active use. This is one of the problems that OPC's can effectively help address.

OPCs provide a safe environment where people can receive life-saving medical intervention in the event of an overdose. OPCs have been proven to reduce public drug use/intoxication, emergency room visits and the presence of discarded syringes in the community. OPC's provide low-barrier opportunities for high-risk people to access services like HIV/HCV testing, MOUD treatment induction, housing support, recovery services and basic needs assistance.

OPCs offer an alternative to cars, stairwells, public bathrooms, parking garages and other unsafe settings where public drug use currently often takes place. OPCs can help us keep people alive as we support them in transitioning from active use to sustained recovery. The passage of H.72 and the creation of OPC's will save lives, fight stigma and make us all safer. We respectfully urge you to take this critical step to enhance our system of care in Vermont.

With appreciation and warm regards,

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