



LAW ENFORCEMENT ACTION PARTNERSHIP

ADVANCING JUSTICE AND PUBLIC SAFETY SOLUTIONS

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Date: January 10, 2024

Re: H.72 - An act relating to a harm-reduction criminal justice response to drug use

Position: **SUPPORT**

To: Vermont House Committee on Appropriations

Distinguished Members of the Committee,

As an organization of law enforcement professionals, the Law Enforcement Action Partnership (LEAP) is writing to express our strong support for H.72 - An act relating to a harm-reduction criminal justice response to drug use. We believe this bill is a crucial first step toward minimizing preventable overdose deaths and boosting public health and safety for civilians and law enforcement in Vermont.

LEAP is a nonprofit organization of police, prosecutors, judges, and other criminal justice professionals who speak from firsthand experience. Our mission is to make communities safer by focusing law enforcement resources on the greatest threats to public safety, addressing the root causes of crime, and working toward healing police-community relations.

[More than 1 million people have died from a drug overdose since 1999](#). Yet these deaths are preventable. As law enforcement, it is our duty, first and foremost, to save lives. One of the greatest frustrations for law enforcement is being called to deal with drug use without the right tools. An officer is dispatched to a call where a 23-year-old who looks like his daughter overdoses in her bathroom. The officer saves her life one week, only to respond too late to save her the following week. These calls haunt the police who can do nothing to solve the underlying problem and then have to break the tragic news to the victim's family.

In Vermont, overdose is one of the greatest threats to community safety. As of the end of September 2023, there were [180 cases of drug overdose deaths](#) involving opioids. There are little to no options to help people who use drugs safely consume without facing criminal and civil penalties.

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Formerly known as Law Enforcement Against Prohibition

A proven harm reduction solution to addressing drug overdose deaths are Overdose Prevention Centers (OPCs), which are safe spaces supervised by medical and harm reduction professionals. People can bring in and use their pre-obtained drugs, and if they begin to overdose, staff can rapidly administer naloxone to reverse the overdose and save the person's life. OPCs educate participants on the proper disposal of needles and syringes and provide referrals to addiction treatment and medical services.

There are [over 147 OPCs around the world](#) that help people recover from overdose, test their drugs for fentanyl, and connect to treatment and counseling. In 2021, two OPCs opened up in New York City, where staff [prevented 636 overdose deaths](#) and [averted 39,422 instances of public drug use](#) in its first year. In addition to [significantly reducing overdose deaths in their local communities](#), OPCs have also been shown to reduce [discarded syringes](#) and [crime](#).

To reduce preventable overdose deaths, it is time for Vermont to join Rhode Island and Minnesota by passing H.72, which would allow the establishment of overdose prevention centers in the state. This bill removes criminal and civil penalties for operation of OPCs, authorizes the creation of OPCs, and establishes state funding for the creation of pilot sites. The bill also establishes the Drug Use Standards Advisory Board within the Vermont Sentencing Commission for determining benchmarks for personal use dosage and personal use supply for regulated drugs.

In addition to reducing overdose deaths, the implementation of safe overdose prevention centers would reduce health risks for police officers. Research shows that [OPCs decrease HIV and Hepatitis C infections related to injection drug use](#). We all benefit when a needle in someone's pocket or on the sidewalk is less likely to transmit HIV. Officers benefit in particular because we often have to reach into someone's bag or search through a trash can, knowing that a needle stick could transmit a life-threatening disease. OPCs would reduce the transmission of communicable diseases, allowing law enforcement to protect ourselves and our communities more safely.

As officers, we understand the concern of some lawmakers that the establishment of safe overdose prevention centers may lead to an increase in crime and drug use. However, just as it has been proven that OPCs decrease overdose deaths, it also has been proven that crime is not associated with the operation of OPCs. A recent [study found no significant increases in violent crimes](#) recorded by the police or calls for emergency service in NYC neighborhoods where the two OPCs are located. The study found a significant decline in low-level drug issues near the OPCs, with a [82.7% reduction in arrests for drug possession](#). New York City has proven that OPCs can save lives while promoting public health and safety.

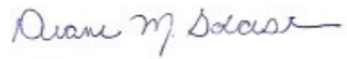
We urge support of this bill to reduce overdose deaths and promote public health and safety. Entire communities will benefit from OPCs, from our police officers and first responders to people who use drugs and people who see drug use in their community. As drug overdose deaths continue to cause tragedies for families across our state, it is time for Vermont to take the next step to prevent overdose deaths and increase access to treatment.

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Thank you for the opportunity to share our perspective in support of this bill.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Diane M. Goldstein". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line at the end.

Lt. Diane Goldstein (Ret.)
Redondo Beach Police Department
Executive Director, The Law Enforcement Action Partnership