

Submitter: Juliana DePietro

On Behalf Of:

Committee: Joint Committee On Addiction and Community Safety Response

Measure: SB1555

To the Joint Committee on Addiction and Community Safety Response:

I am an Oregon resident and hold a Masters Degree in Public Health from Harvard University. As a concerned Oregonian and a public health professional, I write to you to strongly oppose any legislation that would criminal penalties for drug possession. Our state has had a dearth of resources for people who use drugs for decades. From a lack of accessible and affordable housing to inadequate behavioral health resources, we continue not to meet the needs of some of our most resilient but also significantly marginalized citizens. Criminalizing drug possession will do nothing to address these resource gaps, nor will it improve any social or political determinants of health in our state. Re-criminalizing drug possession will only compound trauma and barriers to stability for people who use drugs. Adding a misdemeanor or felony charge to someone's record for drug possession adds one more stigmatized piece of information that will show up on a background check when someone applies for a job or housing. Incarcerating someone for using drugs forces them into precipitated withdrawal when they don't have access to the drugs they used or medication to support their withdrawal during incarceration, which in turn leads to significant harm and even mortality risk. Addressing a behavioral health issue through carceral means does nothing to address root causes of drug use or create resources for sustained stability and safety for people who use drugs or the communities they live in. Re-criminalizing drug use will also increase negative health outcomes for people of color in Oregon who use drugs. We know Oregonians of color are already overrepresented already in our incarcerated populations, and we know that people who are incarcerated in general have worse health outcomes than people who are not. When I see measures to add criminal penalties for drug possession, I can't help but think about how many Oregonians support these bills because they just don't want to see drug use on their streets. I know many of my neighbors want drug use removed from the public eye, and the only option they can think of within our existing infrastructure is the use of the carceral system. Rather than pursuing the failed and racist tactics of the War on Drugs in an attempt to remove drug use from public spaces, we should instead invest in evidence-based interventions like overdose prevention sites. Overdose prevention sites like On Point in New York City and those that exist in many cities around the world have been shown to reduce overdose outcomes by giving people who use drugs safe places to use, survive, and access needed health services. We know that drug use persists in spite of supply gaps or criminal penalties and that making use more dangerous and stigmatized only increases overdose risk. Until we have a full spectrum of accessible, long-term, and stable resources available to everyone who uses drugs, people will continue to use and be at risk of overdose, particularly if that drug use happens in isolation or in fear.

Providing a safe place for people to use drugs with others around allows for prompt response in the event of overdose and provides supportive rather than harmful spaces for people who use that are still out of the public view. Based on data from NYC's overdose prevention site, overdose prevention sites are also not associated with increases in violent crime, property crime, or 911 calls.

Please consider investing in evidence-based interventions that support positive behavioral health outcomes rather than the re-criminalization of drug use. This public health crisis will only get worse if we use the wrong tactics to address it. I urge my legislators and representatives to consider rational and compassionate decisions that will improve the health and safety of our communities for everyone.