

February 9th, 2024

Testimony for HB 1555 - Community Outreach through Radical Empowerment and Associated Staff

Chairs Lieber and Kropf, members of the Committee, for the record my name is Dylan Weil, Executive Director of Community Support at Community Outreach through Radical Empowerment (CORE), a M110 funded harm reduction agency in Eugene, and I am writing this testimony and behalf of myself, and Brittiny Raine, Executive Director of Community Engagement at CORE. This testimony reflects both our personal and professional reactions to HB 1555.

Community Outreach through Radical Empowerment (CORE) is a low-barrier harm reduction and positive youth development organization serving unhoused, marginalized, and impoverished young people ages 29 and under in Lane County. Our mission is to support, empower, and advocate for young people who are surviving the effects of poverty, addiction, homelessness, or other adversities. Through CORE's unique blend of Street Outreach, Case Management, Harm Reduction, and Life Skills programming, we create opportunities for safe spaces, trusted adult support, and a self-affirming environment. We work with young people at a critical and vulnerable point in their lives, offering evidence-based programming to help prevent death by overdose, spread of infectious diseases, re-traumatization, chronic homelessness, increased drug use, and incarceration.

Since being funded by M110, CORE has grown from an all volunteer organization operating on a shoestring budget and working out of a closet, to a fully developed non-profit with 5 paid employees and a brick and mortar location where we implement 5 different programs centered around advancing harm reduction in our community. In 2023 we served 1,444 individual young people through these programs. Over the last year we had 62 young people engaged in our case management programs, 55 of whom transitioned into housing or became stably housed during that period. This demonstrates a huge success within our service model and program implementation. M110 funding has given CORE an opportunity to shine in our own light and develop our programming from theory to practice. In addition, we distributed almost 12,000 meals, and nearly 15,000 harm reduction and survival supplies.

We also distributed over 1,100 doses of naloxone to young people in the community who are actively using drugs which have the potential of saving an equal number of lives. A huge component to our work is education around harm reduction, including how to administer naloxone and how to respond to an overdose, and even how to use drugs in a safer manner as to reduce the harm experienced by young people in our community.

CORE recently set down permanent roots in Lane County, opening the Zephyr House, an advocacy center for young people. Advocates with personal lived experience lead life-skills and recreation workshops as well as provide one-on-one case management centered around participant-led goal planning. We create opportunities for young people to engage in and learn about harm reduction techniques, access appropriate behavioral health programs, re-engage in education, expunge their criminal record, increase their personal earning potential, reconnect with their families, explore housing options, improve their physical health, or get support working on other self-identified goals.

CORE is a culturally-responsive organization with programming that is created by and for young people. Our participants include young people ages 16-29 who are unhoused or living in extreme poverty who have also experienced trauma related to foster care, sex-work, trafficking, domestic violence, gang-life, neglect, or childhood abuse. The majority of the young people we serve identify with a historically underserved group; including BIPOC (55%) LGBTQIA+, young people with incarcerated parents (68%), young people living in rural communities outside Eugene (42%) and young people with chronic mental health struggles and post-traumatic stress from difficult childhoods or past experiences.

Drug use among this young population is often connected to an effort to self-medicate and escape severe trauma, personal suffering, and grief. CORE case managers work directly with up to 60 young people each year, helping them establish their own goals and working alongside them to remove barriers to achieving them. CORE served more 1,444 young people during 2023 across 5 different programs. During this time we had 62 young people on our caseload with 55 people transitioning into housing or becoming stably housed.

CORE's programs are widely proven to positively affect outcomes pertaining to educational advancement, financial health, safety planning, drug and alcohol use, mental and behavioral health, and personal achievement. Harm reduction is the entry point to our organization, an evidence-based practice that promotes a philosophy of hope and healing among young people and plays a significant role in preventing drug-related deaths and increasing access to social services, healthcare and long term treatment. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), new users of syringe-service providers such as CORE are "five times more likely to enter drug treatment and about three times more likely to stop using drugs than those who don't use the programs."

Evidence shows that CORE programming is also a solution in interrupting the cycle of trauma from mass incarceration by offering voluntary support for young people to seek treatment or services on their own terms. Jail and prison time have been proven ineffective strategies for recovery and recuperation, instead harming physical and mental health, impeding educational and career success, and exposing young people to additional trauma or abuse.

We operate from the understanding that drug use is a result of human suffering. We know that young people suffer in our community on a daily basis due to factors out of their control and also out of our control. This means that we will continue to live in a state where young people are actively using substances to cope with continued trauma of living in this un-equitable and often damaging environment. If we have data to prove that harm reduction interventions are an effective means of reducing death and spread of disease related to drug use, then we can infer that we are in desperate need of adequate harm reduction programming for young people. CORE was an early adopter of this mindset and has proven through the last 7 years of community engagement that we are committed to and dedicated to the notion that young people deserve better, and we will not stop doing everything in our power to create more equitable and effective solutions for young people struggling to overcome these barriers.

There has been a nearly 300% increase in new services funded by Measure 110. But Measure 110 cannot solve the addictions crisis alone, Oregon has only 50% capacity to meet addiction treatment services. We need more detox, more supported and recovery housing, more rapid response on our streets with outreach workers trained to get people into care. This is the right approach for Oregon.

As new addiction services are finally starting to open up and crime rates post-pandemic are dropping, the legislature should focus on solutions that let mental health and drug treatment professionals help

people who need and want treatment, instead of implementing controversial policies that disproportionately harm Black and brown communities and our houseless neighbors.

To be truly successful, the legislature should increase withdrawal management, detox, recovery and sober housing, and other services that are causing waitlists across the state for care and causing our addiction and overdose crisis. These services should be culturally specific and available on demand to everyone who needs them.

As you expand services, the legislature should ensure that Measure 110 funds are protected through the Behavioral Health Resource Networks and no dollars are diverted to pay for criminal system expansion.

HB 1555 creates a destructive revolving door treatment system that hurts people suffering with addiction. There is minimal treatment available for anyone, including people who are arrested. Hooper Detox turns away 200 people a month.

HB 1555 punishes individuals for the state's failure to adequately fund treatment services. When half of the treatment services needed for our state is available and the Oregon Health Authority research showing that Oregon has an acute shortage of treatment for substance use disorders and withdrawal management, with a projected need of almost 2,200 new beds, it's clear that the real problem is lack of services.

I would also like to remind you that our justice system is already overwhelmed and does not have capacity to take on the effects of this bill. There are thousands of people in the justice system currently who are unrepresented by public defenders and this would only make that problem worse.

As a M110 service provider serving young people in our community we regularly get dozens of phone calls each week from young people requesting services, some of which we can provide and some of which are not accessible, do not exist, or are at capacity.

One of the largest barriers we face when working with young people in a harm reduction setting is the problem of affordable housing. This barrier can be the difference between life or death for a young person living outside, yet it is something as a provider we have little to no control over. This is a root cause and an ongoing issue that HB 1555 fails to address.

When a young person has a criminal record it makes it exponentially harder to find safe and adequate housing options. We see this time and time again that the justice system creates barriers for young people who are already trying their best to get their basic needs met. This exemplifies the issues of lack of housing, basic needs services, and ongoing supportive services especially for young people in Oregon.

For decades, different cities across the county have tried to implement outreach teams and service based programs through their local police jurisdictions. However most of these examples have been proven to be ineffective with insufficient data to show substantial gains or public safety improvements.

Last year alone, CORE advocates made 333 successful referrals to other service providers in the state. If you look at the ratio of interactions to referrals you can clearly see that service providers are not only more willing but more competent and committed to making accurate and timely referrals to adequate services. Individuals in need of support need more options and diverse types of services at their disposal. Each person experiencing difficulties in our community needs a different combination of support and it is

all too clear after decades of criminalization, that M110 is a step in the right direction in terms of reducing unnecessary police involvement for issues that are derived from socioeconomic divides and lack of compassionate and data driven approaches.

If this committee decides to repeal M110 and move back towards criminalization in any way they will be undoing the work and deep investments that have been made for BHRN's and service providers across the state on top of letting down an already underserved population by creating increased barriers rather than increased services. I would also like to remind you that M110 was passed by the will of the Oregon voters and any action taken against this Measure will be a direct attack on democracy and voter's rights in Oregon.

Not only will this bill disproportionately affect BIPOC populations in our state, this will also create potentially unintended consequences for young people experiencing substance use disorder related to factors out of their control. In turn this will create a greater instability for a population that is already vastly underserved, heavily stigmatized, and gravely misunderstood - furthermore exacerbating long term homelessness, drug use, adult homelessness, death related to drug use, and many other factors related to the health and safety of our community for decades to come.

Finally, I will note that we do not have sufficient services to provide housing, adequate case management, employment opportunities, and long term support for people who are involved in the criminal justice system for drug related charges. The programs that do potentially exist for this population are already at capacity and typically do not work with folks who have only small charges, are on bench probation, or served a short sentence.

To summarize, we oppose HB 1555 because it does not offer any viable solutions or alternatives not already proven to fail for our community. We clearly need more services, not more barriers to prosperity. The voters have decided that we need change, and HB 1555 is the exact antithesis of the will of the people.

Dylan Weil
Executive Director of Community Support
Community Outreach through Radical Empowerment (CORE)
(541) 870-0356
Dylan@COREeugene.org
692 Jefferson Street
Eugene, OR, 97402