

Testimony opposing SB 1573

Chair Reynolds, Vice Chair Anderson and members of the committee

My name is Haven Wheelock. I have been providing harm reduction services in the Portland Metro area for nearly 20 years. I am coming to you all today with strong opposition to SB 1573.

Harm Reduction including syringe service programs are a vital part of the continuum of care for people who use drugs. They are evidence based practice to prevent the spread of HIV and Hepatitis. They are the most efficient and effective way to get naloxone into the hands of people most likely to die of an overdose and they are a key to linking people to services like housing, healthcare and treatment for substance use disorder. These services serve as a lifeline and a bridge for many people who are using drugs.

I heard a lot of misunderstanding about the work that I do in the testimony I listened to today. I heard harm reduction services being portrayed as promoting drug use which is not at all correct. Harm reduction services understand that NOT using drugs is far safer than using them. We accept the reality that people are doing drugs. Changing their relationship to drugs is hard, especially when trying to do it in within a fractured system. We accept people's autonomy and individual circumstance and work to ensure that people know the risks of the substances they are taking and to mitigate these risks where we can and to support people in their healing journey.

I also heard people speak of harm reduction services as if we are just distributing supplies to people. Yes, we will just hand someone a bag of new syringes if that is what the encounter needs and we will do so knowing that each new needle means that is one less time that individual will be at risk for a costly and sometimes deadly infection like HIV or Hepatitis. But that is far from all we do with these services. We are working to build trust with a community of people who have been pushed out of our systems of care. We are talking to our participants about their health and their lives. We are providing information about our changing drug supply and what we know and what we don't know about what that means for their health. We are a sounding board for people to

process the trauma of homelessness, of violence, of grief. Not a day goes by where I do not have someone come to me in tears over something that is weighing on their heart. Not a day goes by where someone I am working with doesn't tell me that our spaces are the only place they feel safe to ask questions. Yes the supplies we distribute matter but showing people that they are valued makes it easier for them to value themselves and their health.

This bill will have devastating effects on our ability to do this work. It will shutter programs that have been serving the community for decades. It will increase our already high rates of hepatitis and HIV. It will slow any progress we are making in our overdose crisis.

Issues around public drug use and substance related litter will not be solved by decreasing access to SSPs, as they are often the only safe way people have to dispose of their used injection equipment. True solutions to these issue come with increase access to full spectrum care including housing and treatment for substance use disorder. It comes with giving people places to be that is not the sidewalk.

Syringe Service Providers chose where to do their work because that is where the people who are using drugs are. These programs are not the reason there are people using drugs in those neighborhoods. Banning them from doing that work will not make that community of people disappear but it will make it more dangerous for both the people who are using drugs and the people who live there. We all want safe communities for ourselves and for our children but this legislation will not create that.

I urge you please, look to the evidence and to the public health guidance about these programs. See people who are using these services as people we want to engage and bring into care not dehumanize and vilify them for existing in our broke systems and please vote no on SB 1573

Thank you for your time.

Haven Wheelock MPH