

My name is Aaron Arnold and I am the Executive Director of Prevention Point Pittsburgh. We have operated in the City of Pittsburgh since May 21, 1995 and are one of just a handful of harm reduction service providers in Pennsylvania. Prevention Point Pittsburgh offers a free, unique, and comprehensive set of healthcare and public health programs to people who use drugs to reduce potential harms such as infections, overdose, and interactions with law enforcement. In 2021 more than seven thousand visits were documented across our five community-based outreach sites, resulting in the distribution of over one million sterile syringes and nine thousand doses of naloxone.

In response to the devastating overdose death numbers in recent years, PPP began purchasing and distributing fentanyl test strips in 2019. Since then over seventeen thousand fentanyl test strips have been given out by PPP. Early in piloting the distribution of fentanyl test strips we asked people to provide information about their experience using them – unsurprisingly the feedback we received was that they were easy to use and effective, with almost everyone stating that a positive fentanyl test meant they took additional precautions when using substances. For the last two years PPP has collaborated with NEXT Distro, and the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency's efforts to reduce overdose by increasing access to naloxone by operating a website through which anyone in Pennsylvania can request and receive free naloxone through the mail. Last year we added the ability for people to also request and receive free fentanyl test strips due to a large number of inquiries, especially in rural areas with fewer local resources to support people who are using substances. To date 37% of the people who request naloxone also request fentanyl test strips and over five thousand have been sent to people across the Commonwealth. These one dollar tests that only take a couple of minutes are already saving countless lives and millions in healthcare costs but can be considered drug paraphernalia under Pennsylvania's outdated Drug, Device, and Cosmetic Act. The City of Pittsburgh and other municipalities have recently moved to pass local regulations that effectively decriminalize the possession, use, and distribution of the test strips, and the State must follow suit to ensure access is possible to every person at risk of overdose in the State.

Therefore, I urge this body to pass legislation such as that being considered today that would allow for a greater deployment of this life saving intervention. The prohibition-style policies of the modern War on Drugs have caused massive harm to our communities, but we can begin undoing some of this damage by removing the stigma and violence from our response to substance use. Every overdose death is a policy failure because our current policies fail to promote health and safety and instead favor criminalization and punishment. This system has created the problem we are in today – an unregulated drug market saturated with cheap, easy to make synthetic substances leading to over 100,000 overdose deaths nationally in the last year.

At Prevention Point Pittsburgh we have proven a different way is possible, one that leads with good science and compassion for people who use drugs. Fentanyl test strips are an essential part of that harm reduction focused response because they are a tool to fight back against the rampant contamination and misrepresentation that is inherent in unregulated markets. This simple and accurate test can provide life-saving information along with the opportunity to educate and empower people who use drugs and engage them in additional supportive services to reduce overdose deaths.

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