

This testimony in support of Representative Struzzi's HB 1393 is submitted by members of Prevention Point Pittsburgh Board of Directors Medical Workgroup.

The overdose crisis has not gone away, and overdose deaths are, once again, on the rise. Sadly, 2020 marked a grim milestone in the United States: More than 93,000 people died from accidental drug overdoses, the highest annual death toll yet.

Fatal overdoses are the leading cause of injury deaths in the United States, more than car crashes or gun deaths. According to the CDC, Pennsylvania experienced 5,172 overdose deaths in 2020, a 16% increase from 2019.

Decriminalizing fentanyl test strips and making them widely available are two small steps Pennsylvania can do to save lives. People have been overdosing from illicit unknown amounts of potent fentanyl for years. Fentanyl test strips allow someone to test their supply and adjust how they use substances in order to keep themselves and others safe.

On Aug. 31, Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto signed an executive order allowing for possession, distribution and use of fentanyl test strips, following Philadelphia's executive order in early August. When overdose deaths keep increasing, it is dangerous and negligent policy to have drug paraphernalia laws that classify fentanyl test strips as illegal. Tragically, in Pennsylvania outside of Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, fentanyl test strips are in fact classified as illegal.

People are dying, yet due to outdated laws that do not coincide with current public health science, it is difficult to provide needed interventions to people where they access other harm reduction services. A broad swath of interventions to reduce overdose deaths is needed across the state. Fentanyl test strips are one powerful way to reduce overdose deaths. Syringe exchange programs, such as Prevention Point Pittsburgh, are an essential tool in the fight against drug overdose deaths. In our region, Prevention Point Pittsburgh has worked tirelessly to support interventions at every level to reduce overdose risk. In addition to fentanyl test strips, they provide naloxone, commonly known as Narcan, the lifesaving overdose reversal agent, as well as sterile supplies, communicable disease testing and access to many more resources.

Fentanyl test strips will not only reduce overdose deaths, but offering them through expanded syringe services may bring individuals with substance use disorders in contact with harm reduction services. There is over 30 years of evidence that access to syringe service programs leads to reduced risk for drug-related harms and improved health outcomes, including decreased transmission of HIV and Hepatitis C.

Further, it is worth noting that fentanyl test strips and syringe exchange programs do not lead to increases in drug use, overdose or crime, and are an essential part of an effective response to the opioid epidemic.

We, as healthcare professionals, have become alarmed by the unacceptable increases in death, injury, illness, and other social and economic costs of opioid and other drug use disorders; employing interventions that have demonstrated success in reducing overdose deaths and providing non-judgmental and welcoming support for people who use drugs is a must. We all have treated individuals who are alive today because of harm reduction tools like fentanyl test strips. We strongly encourage all Pennsylvania state legislators to support Representative Struzzi's HB 1393.

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