

Gather in compassion to support our loved ones who use drugs |

COMMENTARY

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As we approach another International Overdose Awareness Day on Aug. 31, we invite people across the state to gather in compassion to support our loved ones who use drugs.

[Last year in Maryland, almost seven people died of an opioid overdose every day.](#) In 2020, we lost 2,518 Marylanders to overdose – our friends, neighbors, co-workers and family members. Every one of the people we lost left behind a network of loved ones who wished they could have done more. As harm reduction advocates, we know that these deaths were preventable. We know we all could have done more.

The deaths happened in all corners of the state, but Baltimore City was hit particularly hard, with 954 opioid overdose deaths last year, up from 851 in 2019.

The deadly overdoses marked a distressing record for both the state and the city, a disturbing reminder that Maryland's overdose epidemic is intensifying. Isolation and stress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic certainly contributed to the tragic loss of life. Maryland has taken important steps to improve access to services and tools that support health and safety for people who use drugs. Access to opioid use disorder treatment programs has increased — although more is needed.

We have also acted to stop overdoses by widely distributing lifesaving naloxone, which can stop an opioid overdose in progress. This has helped but the disturbing rise in overdose deaths shows that we need to do more.

It's time we adopt a policy to establish overdose prevention sites, which are safe, indoor facilities that provide people who use drugs a place for consumption in the presence of trained professionals. For three decades in other countries, overdose prevention sites have been proven to be effective at reducing overdose deaths, improving health outcomes and reducing crime rates in their surrounding areas.

Staff at these sites are on hand to make sure those using drugs do not overdose. That will ease the strain on the emergency medical system and hospitals, which must deal with a steady stream of overdose patients — even while handling a surging COVID-19 caseload.

At these overdose prevention sites, our loved ones would have immediate access to life-saving interventions, medical care, emotional support, and non-judgmental therapeutic relationships. There will be caring professionals who will help clients connect to social services and treatment if they want it.

These sites are a pragmatic strategy that will save the lives of people at risk of overdose. Some may argue that such an approach encourages drug use. The reality is that people are going to use drugs; it's just a matter of where.

Without an overdose prevention site, they will have no choice but to use in alleyways or bathrooms, they will be alone in unsanitary conditions and at a much greater risk of dying. An overdose prevention site provides a safe alternative where people can get help if they need it.

This is not a new concept. Overdose prevention sites, otherwise known as safe injection facilities and safer consumption spaces, have been operating with positive results in over 12 countries, including Canada, Switzerland, Germany, the Netherlands and Spain.

Evidence from these sites show that facilities that allow safer drug use reduce overdose deaths and provide an entry into treatment. [One study in Canada found that over three years an overdose prevention](#) site helped 67 percent of participants begin treatment.

There has not been a single overdose fatality at any of the more than 150 safe drug use facilities that operate worldwide. Another Canadian study published in The Lancet facility found that [overdose mortality dropped 35 percent in the area surrounding an overdose prevention site](#) after it opened.

In the United States, Rhode Island recently established a pilot program to set up such sites, the first state to do so.

It's time for Maryland to follow suit. We will strongly support legislation in the 2022 General Assembly session to establish these safe, overdose prevention sites. Key leaders, including Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott and State's Attorney Marilyn Mosby, also support the idea.

We can't end the overdose crisis overnight; but by establishing these sites, we can make progress on our most important goal – saving lives.

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