

Good morning, Health and Human Services Committee members,

My name is William Hurley and today I am speaking as a representative of Needlepoint Sanctuary and as a person whose life has been indelibly shaped by the War on Drugs. As a former user of criminalized substances, I have experienced first-hand the stigma and violence inherent within the war on drugs. I have experienced medical discrimination, police harassment, and have seen the ways in which punitive approaches to substance use violate the human rights of drug users. The War on Drugs must be central to any understanding of reforms related to substance use, for its impacts on health, on incarceration, and on the destruction of communities is immense. The War on Drugs, in as much as it relates to its stated objectives, has been a failure. The Drug Enforcement Agency, despite immense funding, has managed to seize only 1% of all illicit drugs that have entered the country, in its entire history. What it has succeeded in, what the war on drugs more broadly has succeeded in, is in the wholesale destruction of entire communities across the country. Prohibition has failed to protect our communities and has instead created an unregulated and dangerous drug supply- a supply that last year took the lives of over 100,000 Americans.

I am here to provide support for LD 1975, for the shift from a punitive approach to substance use towards a public health one is a positive change in the right direction. This bill will help save lives, help support organizations doing front-line work, and prevent a lot of needless harm that would be visited on drug users in the form of incarceration, discrimination, and stigmatization. I am also here to direct your attention to another much-needed aspect of reform, as it relates to preventing overdose deaths and recognizing the inherent human rights associated with substance use.

This reform is that of ending the war on drugs, of clearly recognizing its failures and the harm it has created and requires contemplating something that is unfortunately seen as very radical: the legalization and regulation of drugs. There are two trends of reform which must be emphasized: one is the public health approach, which the act before you is a praiseworthy example of. The other trend is that of legalization, of regulation, of the inherent human right to use substances. The concept of legalization is only seen as radical because we are so steeped in drug war propaganda that we have been disconnected from the history of human substance use. Humans have been using substances for all of recorded history- and substance use is normalized when it comes to certain substances.

Even though the public health impacts of alcohol are at least financially more damaging than that of heroin, we recognize that people have a right to drink alcohol and have a right to a regulated supply of this substance. During prohibition in the 1920's we saw the alcohol supply follow a similar process to that which has occurred with opiates- and we saw alcohol related deaths rise. We saw no decrease in the prevalence of alcohol use, or abuse. Since 2008, when enforcement against heroin and prescription opiates increased, we have seen the rise of fentanyl into the drug supply. This effect is called the Iron Law of Prohibition, and it is indeed a law- its cause and effect is clear. Prohibition of a given substance leads directly to a more dangerous and unregulated form of that substance. Today we see this continuing. It is clear: the cause of destruction is not in fact the substance, the crisis is not one of substance abuse, the crisis is one of a poisoned drug supply, that has been created by prohibition.

I urge you to pass LD 1975 as a commonsense measure to save lives and provide greater support for those suffering as a result of the current drug supply. But I also urge you to begin considering the failure of the War on Drugs itself and to begin critically thinking about the prospect of legalization, of regulation of the drug supply- which will go directly to the root of this problem. Thank you.