March 21, 2023

Comments in Support of S.B. No. 9:
An Act Concerning Health and Wellness for Connecticut Residents

To Co-Chairs Senator Anwar and Representative McCarthy Vahey, Vice Chairs Senator Kushner, Senator Marx, and Representative Parker, Ranking Members Senator Somers and Representative Klarides-Ditria, and distinguished members of the Public Health Committee:

My name is Steve Werlin. I am a resident of New Haven, where I have the honor of serving as Executive Director of Downtown Evening Soup Kitchen, or DESK. I offer testimony here in support of S.B. No. 9, specifically sections 4-5, concerning the establishment of “harm reduction centers,” or put more specifically, Overdose Prevention Centers (OPC’s).

DESK has been serving people experiencing homelessness and living in poverty in New Haven for nearly four decades. Today, our day-program for people living on the street serves over 900 people annually; our overnight warming center this winter has served more than 500 unduplicated individuals since we opened our doors in November.

Since the 1980s, substance use has played a determining role in our work, affecting the lives of more than half of those we serve directly, and all those we serve indirectly. The increase in the number of fatal opioid overdoses in New Haven in recent years has further shaken us to our core.

Thankfully, we have not had any fatal overdoses at DESK; this is due entirely to the lifesaving heroism of my staff. Since early December, our frontline workers have reversed eight overdoses in and around our building and neighborhood.

Among the first overdose reversals in this most recent wave involved one of our staff members and an intern. They had just gotten off their shift and were heading toward the
train station when they discovered a client of ours, whom they had just seen a few hours earlier, laid out on the sidewalk in the midst of an apparent opioid overdose.

Just as they had been trained, the two of them assessed the situation, called 911, and grabbed their Narcan kit. Narcan, or naloxone, is a powerful antidote that reverses an opioid overdose in process. Long before emergency medical personnel arrived, our personnel administered Narcan in the form of a nasal spray and saved this individual’s life.

While this quick action and response from our team was impressive and laudatory, the situation was, sadly, not unique—nor was what happened the next day. The man whose life had been saved returned to our Drop-in Center for services. It should go without saying but it’s worth articulating anyway: we can’t improve the lives of those we serve if we can’t first save the lives of those we serve. Our clients need to be alive for us to help them.

This man’s life was saved by both quick-acting, well-trained staff... but also by dumb-luck. If he had not been discovered, he would surely have died, alone on that cold sidewalk. Opioid overdoses are now the leading cause of death for Americans under the age of 40. In 2022, we lost more than 107,000 people in our country to opioid overdoses, more than from car accidents, and up from 70,000 in 2019. Overdose Prevention Centers (or Harm Reduction Centers) as outlined in Section 4 and 5 of S.B. 9 are a key strategy in preventing these deaths of Connecticut residents. In 2021 alone there were 1,524 preventable deaths in Connecticut from overdoses.

As too often the case, the U.S. lags behind its economic peers in progressive approaches to healthcare. OPC’s have been saving lives across Europe, Canada, and Australia, for decades. In the fall of 2021, the first officially recognized OPC opened in New York City. After its inaugural year, OnPoint NYC saved more than 600 people from what would have otherwise been fatal overdoses, as well as an estimated $12 million in emergency medical care (ambulances and ER visits—the most expensive form of medicine). OPC’s offer a proven and safe strategy to reduce deaths, improve lives, and save taxpayer dollars.

Opponents of OPC’s argue that a dedicated space to consume drugs might bring crime to an area, but the data tell a different story. Recent systematic reviews of published data found no increase in local crime nor public nuisance around OPC’s. Indeed, if anything, an OPC moves drug use from parks and streets to a clean and comparatively safe facility,

away from public space. (Notably, OnPoint NYC’s Harlem location is across the street from a daycare center, with whom they have a very positive relationship.)

**It is time for this life-saving strategy to come to Connecticut.** I urge the Committee members to support S.B. 9’s call for an OPC pilot program to determine the effectiveness of this compassionate, effective, and economic-prudent approach.

If you have any questions, particularly regarding the intersection of opioid use and homelessness, please don’t hesitate to reach out to me at swerlin@deskct.org or (475) 238-8557.

Thank you for this opportunity to offer testimony.

Sincerely,

Steve Werlin
Executive Director