



**Testimony of Nilesh Kalyanaraman, MD
Chief Health Officer, Health Care for the Homeless**

before the

**Maryland House of Delegates: Committee on Health and
Government Operations**

on

**HB 0519: Public Health – Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Safer Drug
Consumption Facility Program**

February 21, 2017
House Office Building, Room 240
Annapolis, Maryland

Good afternoon Chair Pendergrass, Vice Chair Bromwell, and members of the Health and Government Operations Committee. My name is Dr. Niles Kalyanaraman and I am the Chief Health Officer and a practicing physician at Health Care for the Homeless. I am joined by Terry Clark, Addictions Counselor at Health Care for the Homeless. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on House Bill 519, to create safer drug consumption facilities.

Health Care for the Homeless is a non-profit federally qualified health center that works to prevent and end homelessness for vulnerable individuals and families by providing quality, integrated health care and promoting access to affordable housing and sustainable incomes through direct service, advocacy and community engagement.

We are all aware of the tremendous burden that heroin and other opioids are taking on the citizens of Maryland. Overdoses and deaths are climbing and we continue to look for strategies to address this problem. Safer drug consumption facilities would offer an additional harm reduction strategy to help address this problem. These facilities provide a setting where people can use heroin using sterile equipment and with medical monitoring in place to prevent overdose and death. Just as importantly, these facilities will provide connections to substance abuse, mental health and medical services to a vulnerable population. Evidence from other countries shows that these types of facilities decrease the number of deaths and overdoses, and do not encourage increased use of drugs.

One of the concerns that comes up when discussing safer drug consumption facilities is that the idea makes some people uncomfortable. At Health Care for the Homeless, harm reduction strategies are a cornerstone of our work. We train our clients and the community to use Naloxone to reverse an overdose and prevent their death. We've heard from our clients about how they've saved other people by using the naloxone we gave them. We utilize medication assisted treatment with buprenorphine to treat opioid addiction and stabilize people's lives so that they can look for jobs and housing. And, we partner with others in the community who provide needle exchange services which reduce the spread of HIV, Hepatitis C and other infectious diseases.

All these treatments – Naloxone, medication assisted treatment and needle exchange – caused concern when they first started. But, as communities adopt these programs we see their benefits in reducing death, overdose and the transmission of infectious diseases. Safer drug consumption facilities are a continuation of this work. In talking with current and former drug users, they have told me and my colleagues about the dangerous situations in which they are using heroin and other drugs – in abandoned row houses, in the boiler room of apartment buildings and in restaurant bathrooms. They need our help in finding additional ways of caring for them.

Safer drug consumption facilities would provide a valuable tool to prevent overdose and death in a vulnerable population while connecting them needed substance abuse, mental health and medical services. I urge Maryland to enact this legislation and lead on this critical public health issue. Thank you for the opportunity to testify here today, and I am happy to answer any questions.