

April 17, 2024

Dear Members of the Vermont General Assembly,

On behalf of NASTAD, I encourage the Vermont Senate to approve H.72, a transformative bill that will save lives and empower Vermonters to make healthful choices. NASTAD is a leading non-partisan non-profit association that represents public health officials who administer HIV and hepatitis programs in the U.S. As implementers of governmental HIV and viral hepatitis prevention programs, NASTAD members recognize that disease prevention efforts must address the syndemic of related conditions and behaviors, including substance use disorder and injection drug use.

Record-high rates of opioid-related mortality across the US and in Vermont are a call-to-action for policymakers and public health leaders to adopt new strategies to address the enduring pain of the overdose crisis. H.72 would unlock an evidence-based, life-saving tool that prioritizes overdose prevention and whole-person health in order to create long-term wellbeing and improve health outcomes for Vermonters in communities facing a high burden of harms associated with drug use.

The criminalization of substance use and people who use drugs has inadvertently created an environment that drives high-risk drug behaviors, such as through insufficient provision of naloxone and sterile injection equipment, lack of drug testing infrastructure to detect the presence and potency of fentanyl and other adulterants like xylazine, and using drugs in isolation due to homelessness or fear of incarceration. Addressing these core health needs through public health approaches that are rooted in community-based harm reduction, such as syringe service programs (SSPs) and OPCs, will decrease preventable deaths and connect people who use drugs to the resources they need to stay alive and succeed in their journey to address substance dependence and their overall health and wellbeing.

H.72 will help to fill the gaps in the Vermont health and justice system by providing a pathway for Vermonters to seek care and improve their health in a trusting, safe space without fear of prosecution. Authorizing the consumption of illicit substances in OPC settings will reduce the risk of overdose by ensuring that OPC staff can intervene in the event of an overdose. Drug testing services can empower Vermonters to know what they're consuming and make smart choices that will reduce the harms of drug use, including those without a substance dependency who use

Officers

Chair

David Kern, Chicago

Vice-Chair

Sarah Braunstein, New York City

Secretary

Debra Guilbault, Kansas

Treasurer

Jeremy Turner, Indiana

Chair-Elect

Clover Barnes, District of Columbia

Immediate Past-Chair

Elizabeth Crutsinger-Perry,
Washington (ex officio)

Board Members

Vontrese McGhee, Alabama

Marisa Ramos, California

Maria Jackson, Colorado

Vince Aguon, Guam

Thaddeus Pham, Hawaii

Andrea Perez, Illinois

Samuel Burgess, Louisiana

Dawn Fukuda, Massachusetts

Tom Dunn, Michigan

Christine Jones, Minnesota

Andy Dillehay, Nebraska

Lorlette Moir, New Hampshire

Anthony J. Hannah, North Carolina

Kathleen Brady, Philadelphia

Larisa Bruner, South Carolina

Kimberly Truss, Tennessee

Felencia McGee, Virginia

Scott Stokes, Wisconsin

Executive Director

Stephen Lee (ex officio)

drugs recreationally and may unwittingly consume fentanyl through pills and other routes of administration. These life-saving gains will build upon themselves, allowing people who use drugs to stay alive first and then focus on improving their wellbeing.

Notably, OPCs will expand the capacity of Vermont's jurisdictional and state-wide public health infrastructure to respond to overdose clusters and infectious disease outbreaks. Partnerships with health departments could lead to more sophisticated disease and drug surveillance in communities and increase the amount of people who are referred to testing, treatment, and vaccination for chronic and costly diseases like HIV and viral hepatitis, boosting statewide and national efforts to eliminate the public health burden of these preventable diseases. As such, public health implementers and infectious disease advocates champion harm reduction and OPCs as an impactful and integral tool to address the health consequences of the modern opioid crisis.

NASTAD members are encouraged by the progress made in the Vermont House of Representatives and urge Senators to support H.72. Vermonters have much to gain from the compassionate, community-based services offered by OPCs.

If you have any questions, please reach out to Stephen Lee, Executive Director at slee@nastad.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Stephen Lee", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Stephen Lee MD, MBA, DHSM

Executive Director

NASTAD