Testimony of Michael Foy Mitchell
General Assembly Appropriation Committee
February 18, 2010

Good afternoon Senator Harp, Representative Geragosian, members of the committee. I am Michael Foy Mitchell and I am a Member of the Board of Directors of Connecticut AIDS Resource Coalition, a member of the AIDS Life Campaign, and a person living with HIV Disease.

According to a recent study by Yale researchers, death from opioid overdoses are increasing in CT and may soon surpass automobile accidents as the leading cause of accidental death. Many of these deaths can be effectively eliminated simply by educating these drug users and by providing clean syringes.

I'm here to urge you NOT to accept the deep cuts that the governor has proposed to harm reduction programs such as clean needle exchanges and other AIDS Prevention Services. A 30% reduction to a program that is already under funded will have long term consequences, including a reversal in the number of new HIV infections among injecting drug users, an increase in mortality rates from AIDS, and an increased mortality from overdoses.

I'm sure I do not need to remind the committee that the costs for treating one person with HIV disease can cost more than $25,000 per year. I know this fact because last year it cost approximately that amount for my own medications.

I do not have enough time to discuss with you the number of my friends who have died from AIDS. Many died simply because they gave up and turned to either alcohol or drugs to avoid dealing with their illness. Last year, another of my friends died in just this manner.

Kevin was 45 when nuns found him living on the streets; emaciated, suffering from exposure, pneumonia, and a serious drug addiction. It was too late to save Kevin, he died January 25, 2009. But I can't help but think had he encountered one of the few SEP's in CT, he might have been saved.

Currently, CT's state-funded SEP's provide the majority of the clean syringes and education to reduce new HIV infections, and serve as a unique access point to social programs designed specifically to help these folks move away from a terrible life of living from high to high. No other programs in CT perform this function so well.

Yes, pharmacists in CT are allowed to sell syringes to these people, however, at present, only about 30 percent of pharmacists in CT are willing to sell syringes to individuals who use them for injecting illicit drugs. I can imagine the compassionate pharmacist who desires to help our friends combat a drug addiction, but I don't know of any specific programs developed by any for-profit entity to combat the issues faced by these individuals. Do you?

Yes, bad behaviors cost everyone dearly. Eliminating or sorely restricting through fiscal allocation Syringe Exchange Programs and other HIV prevention programs will lead to more deaths, more infections, and more costs down the road.

Thank you,