

Testimony of Melanie Alvarez

HB 5063

7 March 2012

Members of the Public Health Committee, Senator Gerratana, and Representative Ritter; I appreciate your willingness to hear my testimony regarding Bill H.B. No. 5063 (RAISED) An Act Concerning Treatment for a Drug Overdose. My name is Melanie Alvarez. I am a Medical Case Manager working with the HIV Population and a citizen in the City of New Britain living in Senator Gerratana's district. I will speak to you today from two perspectives, both personal and professional.

If I can impress just one point on the committee today, I hope that it will be this: Accidental overdose is not just a problem in our cities, or in injection drug users; it is a problem for anyone who has or has had an opiate dependence, including prescription drugs and it is EVERYONE'S problem since us tax payers are bearing the financial burden of unnecessary hospitalizations. It affects all sectors of our communities from the youth to the elderly, the rich to the poor, and every race, color and nationality.

The Connecticut Department of Public Health Reports 980 drug induced deaths from 1999-2011. Many of these deaths could have been avoided if there were proper access to overdose prevention medication such as Narcan. In September of 2011, The National Institutes of Health published a study that found that nationwide there was a 122% increase in poisoning due to opioid pain and related medications in youth aged 18-24. In the 18 and older population, there were 1.6 million hospitalizations for accidental overdose, for an overall cost of \$15.5 billion. Compelling evidence for prevention would be a reduction in these costs for the State of Connecticut. I was unable to find Connecticut specific statistics but it would be an interesting point for this committee to consider if these numbers are available.

From a professional perspective, I have lost many clients to substance abuse overdose, mainly heroine but also a number to prescription drug overdose. We do everything possible to offer these individuals treatment from counseling to in patient detox program referrals, to methadone or suboxone replacement therapy. One thing is clear to me through my more than ten years of experience: you cannot stop people from doing drugs if they want to use! Introducing this bill would not "encourage" people to use drugs as many people who are misguided or uneducated in addiction and treatment modalities may think. What we can do is save lives and save money for our state by giving people an alternative to death and hospitalization. The problem with the drugs on the street is that they are not regulated and have varying degrees of purity, in addition to the fact that everyone metabolizes drugs differently. People have been known to overdose from a very small amount of drug.

From personal experience, I have lost many friends and even a parent to opiate overdose. I grew up in a "nice" gated community in the suburbs, both of my parents drove "nice" cars, and I went to a "nice" school. My parents were successful small business owners. My father was a person who was clean and in recovery for many years and then one relapse resulted in his death. What was found in the blood was a very unsubstantial amount; maybe less than a Percocet to give you an idea. Afterward, the police stated, "He was not a typical junkie like we see in the streets." In retrospect though, he is just as dead as any one of those so-called "junkies" that overdoses without medical intervention. I believe if there were access to this medication, Narcan, at the time of his death, he may still be alive today.

I urge you to please support this bill and again thank you for your time.