

HB 5487 An Act Providing Immunity to a Person Who Administers an Opioid Antagonist . . .
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Senator Coleman, Representative Fox, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is William Tootle and I serve on the board of the Windham Harm Reduction Coalition. We provide syringe exchange services to residents of eastern Connecticut. I am here to express my support for HB 5487, which would provide immunity to anyone attempting to save the life of someone experiencing an opioid overdose by administering naloxone.

If they have not already, others will testify in great detail today to the high rates of overdose deaths locally and nationally and to the effectiveness and harmlessness of naloxone. What I would like to do, then, is make sure that amid all the relevant science and statistics, the people most affected by opioid overdoses do not disappear.

Actor Philip Seymour Hoffman's fatal heroin overdose last month was tragic. It captured the nation's attention and brought the overdose epidemic into sustained mainstream discussion. And it has spurred some noteworthy action at the federal level, as evidenced by Congresswoman Donna Edwards's reintroduction of the SOS Act last week and Attorney General Holder's support this week for equipping first responders with naloxone.

All of this is positive. But I can't help but be struck by the fact that thousands of ordinary people have been dying of drug overdose each year in this country for decades. The number has tripled since about 1990 such that now approximately 40,000 people die each year of drug overdose. It is now the leading cause of death by injury in the US.

As I said, Mr. Hoffman's death was tragic, and I am glad it has focused public attention on the problem of drug overdose in general and opioid overdose in particular. But it troubles me that so many lives have already been unnecessarily lost for so long without generating the kind of attention and concern that the death of a celebrity can trigger. Ordinary people who use drugs, who abuse drugs, who are addicted to drugs are precisely that—people. They are our children, our parents, our partners, our friends, our neighbors, our colleagues—all remarkable in their own ways. They have faces and names, aspirations and pain. They have imperfections like all of us, but they are as real and distinctive as you and me. They are often labeled and dismissed as drug abusers, but they are *people*. And none of them has to die of an opioid overdose because its antidote, naloxone, exists and has existed for decades.

Naloxone is, of course, not a solution to the problem of opioid abuse and addiction. That will require far greater changes in our society, which promotes destructive drug use and undervalues drug users. But there is something simple that we can do *right now*, this very moment, to curb the high rates of overdose deaths and reduce the pain and suffering that ripple out from them.

And that something we can do is make naloxone more accessible to everyone likely to encounter an opioid overdose. HB 5487 would help do that. Too many lives have been unnecessarily lost to preventable overdose. And too much collective pain has been unnecessarily inflicted on the people connected to those lives. No one who dies of an overdose has the chance to recover from addiction. I support HB 5487 and urge you to do the same. Thank you.