

Iruka Hall
Volunteer, SWAN (Sex Workers & Allies Network)

**Testimony opposing HB 5583: An Act Concerning Emergency Intervention By A Police
Officer When A Person Suffers An Overdose**
Public Safety and Security Committee
March 2, 2021

Dear Representative Horn, Senator Bradley, Senator Osten, Representative Paolillo, and distinguished members of the Public Safety and Security Committee,

My name is Iruka Hall. I am a volunteer at Sex Workers & Allies Network in New Haven. I work with people who use drugs every day. I know community members, friends, & loved ones who use drugs or are affected by drug use. I am committed to harm reduction & to supporting my community members. I believe that this bill will negatively impact the lives of people who use drugs & those around them. Therefore, I am writing to testify in opposition to House Bill 5583.

Our main concern should be caring for & prioritizing the safety of the person experiencing an overdose. House Bill 5583's proposition does the opposite. Involuntary or forced treatment has been shown to be ineffective and is not an evidence-based strategy to connect people to services--some research has even shown that a history of involuntary treatment increases the risk of overdose ([source](#)). Fear of arrest and interactions with law enforcement has been repeatedly shown to be a barrier that keeps people who witness an overdose from calling emergency services, increasing the risk of fatal overdose, even in states with Good Samaritan Laws ([source](#)). Research conducted with people who use substances has shown that fear of law enforcement is a barrier to accessing harm reduction services ([source](#)). When the threat of punishment comes into play, human dignity and safety are no longer prioritized. Outcomes & lives are negatively impacted.

Police intervention during an overdose also heightens tensions. Arrest is often distressing and traumatizing--being taken into custody would add to the trauma of the overdose itself, and will make people less likely to call emergency services if an overdose occurs again in the future. Furthermore, this proposition means that a hierarchy of care is reinforced. Those already most privileged by societal systems will continue to receive the best care, while those most marginalized will be put into violent & dangerous situations. Potential for differential treatment based on racial or other forms of profiling, with some people taken to the ER and others to jail after experiencing an overdose, opens the door for abuse and discrimination. Furthermore, an arrest can deeply negatively impact a person's future, including someone's ability to receive an education, find employment, and otherwise be integrated in their community--this can lead to more spiraling life circumstances that could have been avoided. People experiencing an overdose need to be given care & be safe, & then be given options for future opportunities, rather than having them taken away.

There are many alternatives to policing drug use. We need to imagine a world where we give dignity & respect to every human life. First & foremost, we need compassionate and trauma-informed care that does not involve law enforcement. This is a more evidence-based approach rooted in respect of the human rights of people who use substances. This includes making sure that communities have the tools necessary to understand drug use & support those who use drugs. In regards to overdoses, communities need access to comprehensive training on how to reverse overdoses and provide care afterwards. This means access to Naloxone & training on how to use it. This is a much faster & more effective strategy for making sure that someone experiencing an overdose gets the care that they need. Second, the community and the police need to be educated on bias against people who use drugs--people who use drugs are first & foremost people, & members of our communities, who deserve to be treated with dignity & respect. Providing more options for respectful community care for people who use drugs is more effective & more compassionate than resorting to punishment.

For these reasons, I hope you will oppose House Bill 5583. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,

Iruka Hall