

**Testimony of Yale University on
SB 895 An Act Concerning Changes to Various Pharmacy Statutes
Frederick L. Altice, MD, Professor of Medicine and Public Health
and Director of Community Health Care Van**

Senator Maroney, Representative D'Agostino, Senator Fonfara, Representative Gibson, and Members of the General Law Committee, thank you for the opportunity to express my strong support for SB 895 An Act Concerning Changes to Various Pharmacy Statutes. I am Dr. Fredrick Altice, a professor of Medicine, Epidemiology, and Public Health at Yale University School of Medicine and School of Public Health, and Director of the Community Health Care Van. I am here to speak specifically in support of Sec. 3 (c) which would allow for the implementation of harm reduction dispensing units.

My primary research focuses on interventions and implementation science at the interface between infectious diseases and addiction and have conducted research in several global health settings. The Community Health Care Van (CHCV), created through the Yale AIDS Program, is a 40-foot, mobile medical clinic that travels directly to New Haven's poorest neighborhoods impacted by HIV/AIDS, illicit drug use, homelessness, and mental illness. It overcomes traditional medical care barriers by bridging the gap to link patients to medical and social services. The CHCV provides effective outreach and intervention activities to re-engage individuals in need of care, with its bilingual staff providing services in primary and HIV care, substance use disorders, mental health, and case management to stabilize those in crisis. It is linked to a number of other harm reduction services that are provided at a traditional brick and mortar venue and through minivans that operate throughout the city. Once secure, clients are transitioned into traditional clinical care sites within New Haven. HIV testing was part of routine care by the CHCV for several years. The advent of the CDC endorsing HIV testing as part of routine care validated that the CHCV is on the forefront of HIV prevention. Other routine screens provided were tuberculosis, hepatitis A, B, C, syphilis, gonorrhea, and chlamydia.

In addition to the CHCV, the program provides health care and harm reduction services (e.g. syringe exchange, naloxone distribution) at no cost to patients at an office location and with a minivan that traveled throughout the greater New Haven area, also known as the New Haven Syringe Services Program (NHSSP). With the volatile COVID-19 epidemic, our program's new mission is to support these communities by helping reduce community transmission by distributing personal protective equipment (PPE) and educational materials on the disease.

Aligning with the Governor's orders to engage in social distancing and to reduce personal contact with others in the community, the City of New Haven has partnered with NHSSP to enhance and continuously make sterile injection paraphernalia and overdose prevention to help reduce community transmission of COVID-19 to people who inject drugs, program staff, and the general community. The program will be operated by the NHSSP (via the Community Health Care Van) in collaboration with the City of New Haven. The activities are embedded within the Harm Reduction Coalition led by Mehul Dalal in the City of New Haven Mayor's office and are coordinated with the Connecticut Department of Public Health's harm reduction activities.

A review of national data suggests that people with substance use disorder are at a 10-fold increased risk for acquiring COVID-19 compared to those without one; this increased risk was highest for those with opioid use disorder. Moreover, during COVID-19, there is heightened stress due to concerns about one's health, altered access to opioids, and disruption of drug use networks, which has resulted in

a 17% increase in opioid-related overdoses and new outbreaks of HIV and HCV infections. Consequently, there is a need to increase access to harm reduction programs, which have generally not been prioritized as essential services, leaving most people who inject drugs to fend for themselves.

The inclusion of Section 3 (c) of the bill will enable NHSSP to respond to the critical needs to increase access to harm reduction services, in terms of geographic proximity and hours of operation. We plan to purchase and manage secure dispensing machines that distribute harm reduction materials (e.g. sterile syringes, disposal cartridges, cookers, cottons, antibiotic ointment, condoms, etc.), as well as COVID-19 prevention supplies (facial coverings, hand sanitizer) and hygiene kits. The packets will also contain information about accessing substance use treatment services. We plan to make them available in three diverse neighborhoods in the New Haven area that are most profoundly impacted by opioids and thereby increase convenience and access, including access after usual business hours. Such programs help address both individual and public health by reducing the in-person contact between clients. In the event of a shut-down of harm reduction services, as was observed in the spring and early summer of 2020, these machines would provide access to supplies alongside telehealth communication with our staff.

Only NHSSP participants will have access to the contents of the machine and will be enrolled into the program by outreach staff. NHSSP participants will be given a unique swipe card or code to retrieve items from the machine. NHSSP staff will determine the amount of supplies each participant receives per week. The public will not be able to access the machines without being enrolled into the program. Such machines have been in place for years in many parts of Europe and more recently used in Nevada, Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia has just called for applications from agencies to implement these machines in that community. With over a decade of experience, they have been found to be safe, securely constructed and installed, and provide a valuable asset to the communities they serve.

Thank you for this opportunity to share our views on this important issue.