



Ohio Senate Health Committee

Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services

March 23, 2022

Good morning, Chairman Huffman, Vice Chairman Antani, Ranking Member Antonio, and members of the Senate Health Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to provide you with proponent testimony on SB 296, which would authorize the use of fentanyl test strips and expand access to naloxone by allowing anyone to distribute and administer naloxone under certain conditions.

Illegal drugs in Ohio and nationwide are increasingly contaminated with fentanyl, a powerful synthetic narcotic that is much more potent than heroin, making it many times more deadly. One way for people who use drugs to avoid an overdose from unknown fentanyl is to use fentanyl test strips. These test strips have been proven to identify the presence of fentanyl in unregulated drugs nearly 100% of the time.

According to drug overdose data provided by the Ohio Department of Health (ODH), Ohio's overdose death rate in 2020 was the fourth highest in the country, driven by deaths attributed to fentanyl. Fentanyl or fentanyl analogs were involved in 81% of overdose deaths in Ohio, often in combination with other drugs. This percentage was up from 76% in 2019, 73% in 2018, 71% in 2017, and 58% in 2016.

Many states, including Ohio in Sec. 2925.14 of the Revised Code, have laws in effect that define drug paraphernalia to include testing equipment used to identify the strength, effectiveness, or purity of a drug, making it unclear as to whether or not fentanyl test strips are permissible under Ohio law. Many community entities are already providing fentanyl test strips as a harm reduction tool to prevent overdose deaths, and federal funding is now available for the purchase of test strips. However, because of the lack of clarity in the Ohio Revised Code, other communities have been hesitant to offer these life-saving test strips out of fear of criminal penalties.

Naloxone (also known as Narcan) is a medication that can reverse an overdose caused by an opioid drug, including heroin, fentanyl, and prescription opioid medications. When

administered during an overdose, naloxone blocks the effects of opioids on the brain and quickly restores breathing. Naloxone has been used safely by medical professionals for more than 40 years. By expanding access to naloxone, SB 296 would reduce barriers at a time when overdoses, particularly from fentanyl, continue to drive overdose deaths up.

Addiction is a chronic disease, not a character flaw. Repeated opioid use causes rapid, observable changes in the brain, and a person who uses opioids needs to continue taking these drugs just to feel “normal.” Addiction is a treatable medical condition, but we must help Ohioans who use drugs stay alive in order for them to have an opportunity to seek treatment and change their drug use behaviors. Both naloxone and fentanyl test strips provide us with proven, effective, and critical resources to save lives and provide opportunities to share information about the dangers of drug use and engage people in treatment. Every day might be that day.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I appreciate your attention and am happy to answer any questions at this time.