

**Testimony submitted to the
Senate Health Committee
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Good morning, Chair Huffman, Vice Chair Antani, and Ranking Member Antonio,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony in support of Senate Bill 296 on behalf of Circle Health Services and The Centers for Families and Children in Cleveland, Ohio. My name is Adriana Whelan and I serve as Associate Director of Primary Care and HIV Programs at Circle Health. As the operator of Ohio's oldest syringe exchange program, Circle Health has long stood at the forefront of evidence-based harm reduction efforts that limit the human cost of our state's opioid epidemic. In 2021 alone, our syringe exchange program served nearly 2,000 people across the program's two permanent sites and our mobile unit.

The syringe exchange program often serves as a first touchpoint for new clients and focuses on reducing the incidence of HIV and Hepatitis C infection in high-risk populations by providing injection drug users with clean supplies and education to slow the spread of bloodborne diseases. But we also know that these programs play a critical role in preventing opioid overdose deaths. Through our partnership with the Ohio Department of Health and Project DAWN at MetroHealth, we receive and distribute Naloxone kits for overdose reversals. Additionally, through funding from the Cuyahoga County ADAMHS Board, The Centers provided 30,000 fentanyl testing strips with educational materials to syringe exchange clients last year.

Naloxone and narcotic testing products are key tools for preventing overdose deaths, and we applaud the General Assembly for their efforts to make naloxone readily accessible for Ohioans with opioid use disorders, their loved ones, and anyone who may be able to reverse an overdose. Senate Bill 296 would further strengthen those efforts and take another major step toward preventing fentanyl overdoses by removing criminal and civil penalties currently in place for possessing or using fentanyl testing strips and similar products. We know that drugs mixed with lethal fentanyl continue to be a leading driver of overdose deaths. According to the Cuyahoga County Board of Health, cocaine and fentanyl mixtures in 2021 were the highest they have been compared to all previous years. The Cuyahoga County Forensics Lab found that between 2020 and 2021, 87% of counterfeit pills contain fentanyl or fentanyl analogs.

Fentanyl test strips allow individuals struggling with substance use disorders to test their drug supply for fentanyl before using. Research has found that nearly half of drug users will reduce the amount they use after a positive fentanyl test result. Although programs like ours currently have authority to distribute these life-saving products, our clients still bear legal risk by possessing them as they are classified as illegal drug paraphernalia under current law.

While our ultimate goal is to help our clients and patients with substance use disorders to stop using altogether, we know that recovery does not happen overnight. Harm reduction sites that provide safe drug use supplies such as clean needles, naloxone, and test strips often serve as a first step toward engaging a hard-to-reach population and connecting them with treatment and recovery resources. Our syringe exchange sites offer case management

services that provide care coordination, including same day scheduling and medication access. But regardless of how ready someone is to seek treatment, no one deserves to die of a drug overdose.

Deaths by drug overdose—specifically opioid-related overdoses—have disproportionately affected Ohio and have hit the City of Cleveland still harder. Ohio has the third highest rate of opioid-related overdose deaths in the United States. In part due to the stress and hardship associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of drug overdose deaths in Ohio increased by 11.3%, from 4,829 to 5,373 between June 2020 and June 2021 according to preliminary data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Opioid-related overdose deaths in Cuyahoga County claimed at least 493 victims in 2021, an increase of 16.3% over 2020. In Cleveland specifically, the unintentional opioid-related mortality rate per 100,000 (72.5) has been almost twice as high as that of Cuyahoga County (37.8) and the State of Ohio (39.2) and five times higher than the national rate (14.5).

We must work together to ensure that we maximize every tool in our toolbox to save lives from drug overdoses—and remove barriers and disincentives that blunt those tools. We commend Senators Manning and Huffman for bringing Senate Bill 296 forward to continue eliminating legal obstacles toward lifesaving harm reduction tools and we thank the committee again for hearing this legislation and our testimony. We would be happy to answer any questions or discuss our programs further with you by phone or email:

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Additional Background on the Centers and Circle Health

Health

We provide high-quality health care to everyone who walks in our door, regardless of ability to pay. Our integrated model of care includes primary care for children and adults, psychiatry, behavioral health care, dental, addiction services, HIV treatment & in-house pharmacies. Through our integrated approach, we provide support to pregnant women, addressing the infant mortality crisis and providing supportive services for the mother during and after pregnancy. We provide health care services to more than 12,000 people each year.

Family



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Our top-rated early learning services help children and families make the most of the critical first 2,000 days of life to be healthy, kindergarten-ready and prepared to succeed in school and life. We operate seven 5-Star rated early learning centers serving children from birth to age five and a comprehensive home visiting program serving families from the pre-natal timeframe to kindergarten. Each year, we serve more than 1,000 families in Cuyahoga County. Our model provides comprehensive support for children, including support for special needs, a focus on nutritional foods through our in-house kitchen, and individualized family support.

Work

Our free workforce programs are open to anyone 18+ (no high school diploma required) and includes short-term career training, specialized industry certifications, and job placement services with more than 100 regional and national employers. Our innovative & individualized approach provides flexible training options for families.