



March 13, 2025

The Honorable Susan R. Donovan, Chair
House Committee on Health and Human Services
State House
82 Smith St.
Providence, RI 02903

RE: H 5616 – An Act Relating to Health and Safety – Department of Health

Dear Chair Donovan:

Please accept this letter regarding H 5616, legislation that would provide that public health advertisements be prohibited from stating that there is a safe way to take illegal drugs. This Act would take effect upon passage.

Please be informed that the Rhode Island Department of Health (RIDOH) public health advertisements do not explicitly or implicitly state that there is a safe way to use illicit substances. Rather, RIDOH messaging focuses entirely on preventing accidental drug overdoses, overdose deaths, HIV, hepatitis C, and other harms related to substance use through evidence-based, harm reduction strategies.

Rhode Island's harm reduction strategies emphasize *safer* drug use practices; not *safe* drug use practices. Safe drug use practices do not exist. Safer drug use is about lessening the risk of adverse outcomes from using drugs. The evidence-based harm reduction strategies utilized in Rhode Island are proven methods to reduce the risk of overdose and overdose deaths related to drug use.

Harm reduction is a public health approach that includes services, counseling, and referrals for people who use drugs with the goal of reducing negative consequences of drug use. Specifically, RIDOH and other State and community partners educate Rhode Islanders about the risks and consequences of substance use, including polysubstance use, the use of two or more substances (illicit and/or prescription) taken together or within a short period. Additionally, RIDOH and other State and community partners connect people who use illicit substances to places in Rhode Island where they can access life-saving harm reduction resources and services such as overdose recognition and response training, sterile syringes, fentanyl test strips, naloxone kits, wound care kits, and testing for HIV and hepatitis C, as well as recovery supports and treatment options.

RIDOH, the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS), and the Rhode Island Department of Behavioral Healthcare, Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals (BHDDH) have worked collaboratively to make substance use disorder treatment more accessible to Rhode Islanders. For example, opioid use disorder treatment options have expanded to mobile treatment units that go into Rhode Island communities most impacted by substance use and overdose and connect people to treatment and recovery support services.

In Rhode Island, there are expanded options for substance use disorder (SUD) detoxification programs and SUD residential programs include services for individuals who are uninsured. Additionally, the Rhode Island Buprenorphine Hotline provides Rhode Islanders with connection to telehealth services 24

hours a day, seven days a week. People experiencing opioid withdrawal can get immediate connection to a physician for a telehealth evaluation and referral to opioid use disorder treatment and recovery supports.

Led by Governor Dan McKee's Overdose Task Force, Rhode Island's overdose response is built on the comprehensive strategies of prevention, rescue and harm reduction, treatment, and recovery. The Task Force is the center of all drug overdose prevention and intervention activities in the State and is driven by a comprehensive Task Force Strategic Plan. There was a 7.3% decrease in overdose deaths in Rhode Island in 2023, the first decrease seen in the state in four years. In 2023, 404 people lost their lives to accidental overdoses in Rhode Island, compared to 436 people who lost their lives to overdoses in 2022. Although Rhode Island is moving in the right direction, it is important to remember that substance use and accidental drug overdoses continue to claim the lives of far too many Rhode Islanders. Each and every individual lost to overdose is a tremendous loss for families, friends, and loved ones.

There is still much more to be done as we continue to move forward to prevent accidental drug overdoses and save more lives. RIDOH will continue to partner on the existing efforts and successful initiatives of the Governor's Overdose Task Force, fellow State agencies, and community partners to continue to reverse this epidemic. Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this legislation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Jerome M. Larkin" with a stylized flourish at the end.

Jerome M. Larkin, MD
Director

CC: The Honorable Evan P. Shanley
The Honorable Members of the House Committee on Health and Human Services
Nicole McCarty, Esquire, Chief Legal Counsel
Lynne Urbani, Director of House Policy