

**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**  
**Washington, DC 20515-2104**

December 10, 2019

The Honorable Andrew Lelling  
U.S. Attorney, District of Massachusetts  
John Joseph Moakley United States Federal Courthouse  
1 Courthouse Way, Suite 9200  
Boston, Massachusetts

Dear U.S. Attorney Lelling,

I am writing in support of exploring the implementation and use of evidence-based methods to address the opioid epidemic, specifically safe injection facilities (SIFs). In recent years the United States, and Massachusetts in particular, has been shattered by the opioid epidemic with increasing deaths, overdoses, and prevalence. This is a public health crisis and we need to support proven policy decisions to address this emergency. Massachusetts is in the process of doing this by considering measures to create SIFs, and I urge your respect of that process.

The opioid epidemic in the United States has drastically increased the number of people who inject drugs (PWID).<sup>1</sup> Drug overdose deaths in the United States continue to destroy communities. Averaging to 130 people per day, more than 700,000 people have died in the last 18 years from overdoses, making it one of the leading causes of injury-related death in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

Like many other states, Massachusetts has seen the devastating effects of opioid use disorder (OUD) and PWID. Approximately 4.4 percent of residents age 11 and older suffer from OUD.<sup>3</sup> In 2018 there were approximately 2,000 opioid-related overdose deaths in Massachusetts, double the national average and increasing over the years.<sup>4</sup> Data would further suggest that there were at least 40,000 nonfatal overdoses in Massachusetts annually.<sup>5</sup> Many of these fatal and nonfatal overdoses are associated with injection drug use (IDU).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/group/hiv-idu.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/epidemic/index.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.mass.gov/doc/legislative-report-chapter-55-opioid-overdose-study-august-2017/download>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.drugabuse.gov/opioid-summaries-by-state/massachusetts-opioid-summary#:~:targetText=Massachusetts%20ranked%20among%20the%20top,14.6%20deaths%20per%20100%2C00%20persons.> ; <https://www.mass.gov/doc/opioid-related-overdose-deaths-among-ma-residents-february-2019/download>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.mass.gov/doc/legislative-report-chapter-55-opioid-overdose-study-august-2017/download>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.who.int/substance\\_abuse/facts/en/](https://www.who.int/substance_abuse/facts/en/)

IDU is not only associated with death, but there are many accompanying health risks. PWID have higher rates of infection, overdoses, and suicides, and are more likely to die from both chronic and acute illnesses.<sup>7</sup> Due to the high rate of needle sharing among new PWID, 9 percent (3,641 people) of HIV infections in the United States are associated with IDU and 67 percent of PWID contract hepatitis C.<sup>8</sup>

Harm reduction strategies, which are evidence-based approaches to reduce the risk of infection and improve public health outcomes, are consistently shown to be effective among PWID. One example is the positive outcomes seen from syringe service programs. Multiple sites in Massachusetts have shown such programs to be instrumental in reducing HIV and hepatitis C rates and transmission, and have demonstrated a reduction in risky injection behaviors.<sup>9</sup>

However, this alone is not enough. We cannot continue to let 2,000 Massachusetts residents die of overdose in the streets of our city annually.

In addition to syringe service programs, Massachusetts is considering the creation of SIFs as another successful harm reduction strategy. SIFs target PWID who generally inject in public and unsterile spaces and provide them with a safe area for use. Staff at SIFs provide sterile injection supplies, administer first aid, and monitor overdoses.<sup>10</sup> The facility staff neither provide the drugs nor assist with injection; they are simply available to ensure the safety of PWID and provide medical advice and drug treatment referrals. SIFs are solely meant to improve public health outcomes by reducing overdoses and connecting PWID to health care professionals and services they need for recovery.

The Massachusetts State Legislature is currently reviewing two bills, S. 1081 and S. 1134. Together, the bills would evaluate the feasibility of and create the only SIFs in the United States. These measures would advance the groundbreaking ways Massachusetts is working to improve health care and combat the opioid epidemic. This approach could have an enormous impact on reducing harm and opioid-related overdoses, improving health outcomes, and reducing stigma associated with IDU. It is important to have both State chambers carry out their responsibilities without interference from other government agencies.

The benefits of SIFs are clear. SIFs consistently lead to a reduction in risky injection behaviors, with 41 percent of SIF clients adopting at least one safer injection habit when using the facility.<sup>11</sup> Clients are 70 percent less likely to share needles, twice as likely to use needles once, and almost three times as likely to use clean water and filter prior to injection.<sup>12</sup> SIFs also effectively connect clients with the treatment resources they need. More SIF clients report starting a drug treatment program compared to those who do not use SIFs, 38 percent versus 21 percent.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, SIFs reduce fatal and nonfatal overdoses and save public resources.<sup>14</sup> Studies have shown

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/91/2/12-108282/en/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/group/hiv-idu.html> ; <https://www.who.int/hiv/topics/idu/about/en/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5387338/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2376869/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5387338/>

<sup>12</sup> Id.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5387338/>

<sup>14</sup> Id.

positive effects in the surrounding communities with a reduction of observed instances of public injection and discarded syringes and related litter.<sup>15</sup>

Massachusetts is a national leader when it comes to health care and public health policy. The two bills under consideration continue to elevate Massachusetts's profile as an innovator and trailblazer in the field of medicine, and most importantly, save the lives of many by providing a safe place for PWID to receive the destigmatized care they need. I urge your respect of the legislative process currently under way, and stand ready to work with you to address the ongoing opioid epidemic and its devastating impact on our communities.

Sincerely,



Joseph P. Kennedy, III  
Member of Congress

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<sup>15</sup> Id.