March 5, 2020

Honorable Tom Wolf
Governor
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
508 Main Capitol Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Honorable John K. Fetterman
Lieutenant Governor
200 Main Capitol Building
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 17120

Honorable Joseph B. Scarnati, III
Senate President Pro Tempore
Senate Box 203025
Harrisburg, PA 17120-3025
Room: 292 Main Capitol

Honorable Mike Turzai
House Speaker
139 Main Capitol
PO Box 202028
Harrisburg, PA 17120-2028

Dear Governor Wolf, Lieutenant Governor Fetterman, Senate President Pro Tempore Scarnati, and Speaker Turzai,

As leaders of Pennsylvania schools and programs of public health, we write to you to urge action on Syringe Services Programs in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

We strongly support the Disaster Declaration in the Commonwealth in regard to the opioid crisis. The declaration is an important step in addressing the epidemic by bypassing burdensome regulations and implementing effective interventions. Subsequent actions to expand access to naloxone, increase the availability of low-threshold, evidence-based drug treatment, and provide resources to families and communities have been key to helping reduce overdose deaths in our state. Still, more must be done.

We write now to strongly support the expansion of Syringe Service Programs, which you may have also heard them referred to as syringe exchange programs, needle exchange programs, and needle-
syringe programs, in Pennsylvania. Such programs are community-based programs that provide access to sterile needles and syringes free of cost, facilitate safe disposal of used needles and syringes, provide access to overdose prevention education and naloxone, and serve as a bridge to drug treatment and other health services.

Pennsylvania currently has the 3rd highest rate of drug overdose deaths and the 9th highest rate of new HIV infections in the country. Hepatitis C, HIV, and other blood born infectious diseases are readily transmitted through contaminated syringes and needles. Other states have already experienced large outbreaks of HIV among people who inject drugs and the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention declares that Pennsylvania is one of the states at risk for, or experiencing, increases in HIV and Hepatitis C. Three counties in Pennsylvania (Luzerne, Cambria, and Crawford) are at imminent risk.

Thirty years of research and experience from around the country prove that allowing for Syringe Service Programs is an expeditious and effective way to prevent the transmission of HIV and Hepatitis C and reduce overdose deaths.

Pittsburgh and Philadelphia have operated successful Syringe Service Program models for over 20 years. However, other communities, especially hard-hit rural communities, are being left out of the benefits of such programs. Removing legal barriers to Syringe Service Programs and allowing for mechanisms of funding for them could provide immediate access to disease prevention tools, lifesaving naloxone, and a needed bridge to treatment.

Current state law prevents our communities from gaining access to federal funds already earmarked for this effort in Pennsylvania, as well as stand in the way of community efforts to respond to HIV, Hepatitis C, and overdose deaths through community-run Syringe Service Programs. Pennsylvania is one of 14 states granted a “Determination of Need” from the CDC to receive and redistribute federal funds for Syringe Service Programs, but these funds cannot be accessed due to the Controlled Substances, Drugs, Device and Cosmetic Act designation of syringes as drug paraphernalia. Thus, Pennsylvania stands to lose hundreds of thousands of dollars that could be used to improve the health in our state.

For public health interventions, it is important to consider and implement evidence-based approaches. These approaches are the core of our field and form the basis for the curriculum and epidemic response in public health. This is never more important than amidst a public health emergency. The National Academies of Sciences recommendations for addressing the opioid epidemic include removal of barriers to accessing naloxone and safe injection equipment, reduction of harms of opioid use, permitting the sale or distribution of syringes, and exempting syringes from laws prohibiting sale/distribution of drug paraphernalia. Syringe Service Programs are endorsed by the preeminent public health authorities including the WHO, CDC, and AMA.

It is essential that we make the right policy changes now to ensure that both existing programs and future efforts are effective. The evidence is clear that such harm reduction strategies work, and
allowing these essential programs to publicly operate and expand their services would be beneficial for all Pennsylvanians. We are all working together throughout the Commonwealth to address the opioid crisis, and we ask for your immediate attention to resolve this issue. We look forward to working with you and your administration to pass legislation that will allow for the implementation of effective public health strategies to save lives and increase the quality of life in Pennsylvania.

Sincerely,

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Ms. Alison Beam, Deputy Chief of Staff, Office of the Governor

Ms. Sarah Newman Boateng, Executive Deputy Secretary, Department of Health
Ms. Kimberly Early, Director, Office of Policy, Department of Health
Ms. Cindy Findley, Deputy Secretary, Health Promotion and Disease Prevention, DOH
Mr. Eric Hagarty, Deputy Chief of Staff, Office of the Governor
Dr. Rachel Levine, Secretary of Health, Department of Health
Mr. Westburn Majors, Director of Legislative Affairs/Policy, PEMA
Ms. Teresa D. Miller, Secretary, PA Department of Human Services
Mr. Randy Padfield, Director, Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency
Ms. Meghna Patel, Deputy Secretary, Health Innovation, Department of Health
Ms. Tara Piechowicz, Deputy Secretary of Policy and Planning, Office of the Governor
Ms. Theresa Ritchie, Drug Program Specialist, Drugs, Devices, and Cosmetics Program, DOH
Ms. Jennifer Smith, Secretary, Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs
Ms. Meg Snead, Secretary of Policy and Planning, Office of the Governor