



Testimony Before the New York City Council Committee on Mental Health,  
Disabilities, and Addiction for Hearing on Establishing a Needle, Syringe, and  
Sharp Buyback Pilot Program

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Presented by:  
Cal Hedigan, Chief Executive Officer  
Community Access, Inc.  
[chedigan@communityaccess.org](mailto:chedigan@communityaccess.org)

*Community Access expands opportunities for people living with mental health concerns to recover from trauma and discrimination through affordable housing, training, advocacy, and healing-focused services. We are built upon the simple truth that people are experts in their own lives.*

[www.communityaccess.org](http://www.communityaccess.org)

Thank you, Chair Lee, Council Member Ayala, and members of this committee, for convening this hearing. As the CEO of Community Access, I lead an organization that has long been at the forefront of efforts to transform our public mental health system into one where the voices of people living with mental health concerns are centered and play a vital role in the design, delivery, and evaluation of services.

Our organization was founded in 1974, in response to the closure of psychiatric facilities, to support individuals who were transitioning into community living. We are one of the leading providers of supportive housing in New York City, and were the first to implement an integrated housing model, which has become a best practice nationally: affordable housing where families live alongside people living with mental health concerns. Our 350 person strong staff works daily to support thousands of New Yorkers living with mental health concerns through supportive housing, mobile treatment teams, job training, supported education, advocacy, and other healing-focused services. Community Access is also proud to be a founding member of the Correct Crisis Intervention Today in NYC Coalition (CCIT-NYC).<sup>1</sup>

Our organization is built on the principle that people are experts in their own lives, and harm reduction is a central tenet of our mission and work. Embracing a harm reduction approach to providing services means that we do not create artificial barriers to participation in our programs and ensures that we are truly able to meet people where they are and support them wherever they are in their life journey.

For too long, the city used the criminal justice system to address drug use, creating irrevocable harm to people and communities. Harm reduction strategies are a lifesaving alternative to tackling the opioid crisis while giving people who use drugs the safety and dignity they deserve. Solutions based in harm reduction are also proven to have better outcomes than abstinence-based programs that exclude, alienate, and stigmatize participants.<sup>2</sup>

I welcome the city's recent efforts to create new programs and policies that center harm reduction. For too long our service system has been dominated by abstinence-based models that have left too many people without access to services they could benefit from. New York City's overdose prevention centers have been an important step in engaging people in services and preventing overdose deaths. I echo the calls of advocates and Mayor Adams to expand the centers' hours so they can operate 24/7 and to open centers across the city to reach more people and save more lives.

I also wholeheartedly support Int. No. 609 to establish a needle, syringe, and sharp buyback pilot program. Implementing this program will support the health of New Yorkers by removing contaminated needles from circulation. It will also help decrease the number of discarded needles around the city, especially near the overdose prevention centers. Residents that live near the centers have complained about the presence of needles in the area. This is one step to address that issue and increase community support for the lifesaving centers.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ccitnyc.org/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/all-about-addiction/201904/how-harm-reduction-is-saving-lives>

This legislation is one of many ways the city can, and should, incorporate a harm reduction approach into our public health system. From providing mental health services to preventing overdose deaths, we must work toward a system that is rooted in human rights, non-coercive, and includes all the principles of harm reduction in service design and delivery.<sup>3</sup>

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. I look forward to working with the members of this committee and of the City Council in creating a healthier, more just city for New Yorkers.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://harmreduction.org/about-us/principles-of-harm-reduction/>