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**TESTIMONY ON 21-S 16,
RELATING TO HARM REDUCTION CENTER ADVISORY COMMITTEE
AND PILOT PROGRAM
January 21, 2020**

The ACLU of RI strongly supports this legislation's goal of establishing harm reduction centers. It would be an extremely important step forward in addressing the state's spiraling opioid overdose crisis. We know that the current punitive law enforcement approach to the drug problem simply isn't working and, instead, bears responsibility for too many avoidable deaths.

Providing drug users with a safe and medically supervised environment, as this bill seeks to do, can not only reduce the death toll from drug overdoses, it can also serve as a critical entry-point for offering and affording them treatment.

However, we would urge consideration of some amendments to the legislation. Last year, the committee considered a Sub A version of this bill [S 2128 A] and we believe the amendments contained in that Sub A once again warrant support. In addition to fleshing out the role of the advisory committee established by the bill, the Sub A included a detailed section providing clients, employees, owners and others involved in a harm reduction center with immunity from liability for violating any drug laws currently on the books. We believe that this protection from legal fallout is essential in order for a center to be able to operate without potentially devastating law enforcement-related consequences. While S 16 calls on the advisory committee to make recommendations on the issue of liability, last year's Sub A was more helpful in providing specific statutory protections.

Having said that, we realize that establishing harm reduction centers creates a potential conflict with federal law, and litigation is playing out in the courts right now over the legality of such a center in Philadelphia. We would be happy to work with members of the committee in trying to ensure that any legislation approved by the committee is crafted so as to insulate it as much as possible from legal attack by federal officials.

We applaud the sponsors for the introduction of this legislation and hope it is favorably considered. Thank you for considering our views on this important topic.

Submitted by: Steven Brown, Executive Director