January 24, 2020

Senator Richard Pan
Chair, Senate Committee on Health
State Capitol Room 2191
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: Support for Assembly Bill 362 (Eggman)

Dear Chair Pan,

On behalf of the Los Angeles Continuum of Care (LA CoC), the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) writes in support of Assembly Bill 362 (Eggman), which advances evidence-based approaches to substance use treatment by piloting the first state-sanctioned safe consumption sites.

LAHSA is a joint-powers authority of the City and County of Los Angeles, serving as the lead agency of the LA CoC. LAHSA is responsible for funding a significant portion of the interim housing, permanent housing, and supportive services for individuals and families experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles County.

With 58,936 people experiencing homelessness on a given night, homelessness is a public health crisis in many parts of Los Angeles County. While we know that homelessness is largely a factor of housing affordability and poverty, other factors, including substance use, can push people deeper into homelessness the longer they go without stable housing and viable options for treatment. In Los Angeles County, nearly 15 percent of the population reported having a serious and long-term substance use disorder. Among those who are chronically homeless, the share rises to 38 percent – just over a third the population, nearly all of whom are unsheltered.

Interventions rooted in evidence-based practices, like Harm Reduction, are the cornerstone of an effective and sustainable approach to addressing homelessness and saving the lives of some of our most marginalized Californians. Over the past five years, 795 deaths in the homeless population were attributed to overdoses from drug or alcohol use, making it the second leading cause of death among people who are homeless in LA County. The rate was higher for women experiencing homelessness; nearly a quarter of deaths in the population were attributable to a substance use overdose, making it the leading cause of death among homeless women. Altogether, deaths related to substance use were singled out as the leading contributor to the increase in mortality rates in the homeless population over the past six years. These are

1 2019 Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count
2 Ibid.
3 County of Los Angeles Department of Public Health. (October 2019.) “Recent Trends in Mortality Rates and Causes of Death Among People Experiencing Homelessness in Los Angeles County.”
4 Ibid.
deaths that are largely preventable and require bold action to advance practices that are proven to create healthier outcomes for our most vulnerable residents.

If passed, AB 362 clears the way for the first state-sanctioned safe consumption sites in the United States. For decades, countries around the world have adopted these sites as practical, preventative measures to meet people “where they are,” while reducing the negative consequences of substance use. These are sites that allow people to come off the street and into safe, supervised spaces with access to clean syringes and other medical interventions that can allow them to safely consume pre-obtained drugs. Research finds that safe consumption sites not only prevent overdose-related deaths but result in higher uptakes in substance use treatment. Closer to home, this bill builds on the state’s leadership in the area of Harm Reduction practices, from advancing wider distribution of Naloxone to expanding Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT) options for persons in emergency care and the criminal justice system. Here in Los Angeles, the Harm Reduction model is foundational to the work of our homeless services system and targeted outreach to people without shelter.

As we continue to address this crisis in our communities, we stand committed to supporting the State Legislature in advancing low-barrier, evidence-based practices that address the needs of our unhoused neighbors and bring them closer to permanent housing. We commend your leadership on this issue and strongly urge your support for the bill.

Sincerely,

Sarah Dusseault
Chair, LAHSA Commission

Heidi Marston
Interim Executive Director