



March 22, 2022

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
United States House of Representatives

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Republican Leader
United States House of Representatives

The Honorable Charles E. Schumer
Majority Leader
United States Senate

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Republican Leader
United States Senate

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Leader McCarthy, Leader Schumer and Leader McConnell:

The Partnership to End HIV, STDs, and Hepatitis is a coalition of five of the nation's leading organizations focused on ending the HIV, STD, and hepatitis epidemics in the United States by sharing resources to advocate for HIV, STD, and hepatitis programs and appropriations. Since our founding in 2016, we have worked to promote necessary appropriation and funding levels; retain crucial aspects of existing health care coverage, including the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and Medicaid; and build upon the progress Federal programs have made on HIV, STD, and hepatitis prevention, treatment, care, and support over the last several decades.

We write to you to express our strong support for robust funding for harm reduction programs, particularly amid the current overdose epidemic. This funding is critical to increase access to a range of community harm reduction services and support harm reduction service providers as they work to help prevent overdose deaths and reduce health risks often associated with drug use. Harm reduction services save lives by being accessible to people and emphasizing the need for compassion toward and collaboration with people who use drugs. Harm reduction is integral to keeping people who use drugs alive and as healthy as possible - a key pillar in the multi-faceted Health and Human Services' (HHS) Overdose Prevention Strategy, which was launched in October 2021.

This is why we urge Congress to fully fund programs that provide critical support for increasing the availability and access to high-quality harm reduction services. Harm reduction programs are essential in engaging people who use drugs in health care and treatment services and must be the anchor for effective national drug policy. Robust harm reduction programs are not only proven to have a positive impact on substance use disorder, but to also reduce rates of other drug-use related infectious diseases, such as viral hepatitis and HIV, and connect people who use drugs with a wide range of health care and social services.

The United States is facing an urgent overdose crisis. The total number of overdose deaths in 2020 surpassed 100,000, a more than 40% increase from 2019, which was itself a record year with nearly 71,000 deaths. Data from the first half of 2021 shows overdose deaths are on pace to top 2020's total. Opioid and other drug use-related infectious diseases such as viral hepatitis and endocarditis have dramatically increased, and several significant outbreaks of HIV among drug

users have occurred over the past few years. Hepatitis C, which kills more Americans than all 60 nationally notifiable infectious diseases combined, has seen a 484% increase from 2010-2019, and studies suggest that 70% of these new infections are among people who inject drugs. Further, COVID-19's impact on the overall mental health and well-being of the nation has played a significant role in this surge of drug-related overdose deaths and new infectious disease cases.

We cannot defeat the overdose crisis or related epidemics without significantly increasing investment in evidence-based harm reduction initiatives. Tackling the intersecting epidemics of overdose, infectious disease, and mental health requires a variety of strategies and services. Funding from Congress should go beyond just programs linking individuals to substance use disorder treatment – which not every individual is ready to initiate – but also support infectious disease prevention and control efforts, distribution of overdose reversal medication, and distribution of syringes and other harm reduction materials. Ensuring harm reduction programs can support the full range of services needed with this funding will allow them to best meet the needs of their communities.

Now more than ever, investments in drug user health and infectious disease are needed. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has been on the forefront in addressing drug use-related infectious diseases and in supporting community-based harm reduction programs. The agency has experience in connecting these types of resources to harm reduction programs, and in providing technical assistance on their services. Specifically, the CDC's Opioid and Infectious Disease program is designed to address these two issues in tandem through community-based harm reduction, syringe services and overdose prevention programs.

Additionally, the Harm Reduction grant program under the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) awards funding to states, local, tribal, territorial governments and organizations, community-based organizations, and providers to support overdose prevention programs, syringe services programs and other related services. These funds provide a proven approach to addressing the public health epidemic involving substance use as well as infectious disease and other harms associated with drug use through:

- Connecting individuals to overdose education, counseling, and referral to treatment;
- Distributing opioid overdose reversal medications to individuals at risk of overdose or to those who might respond to an overdose;
- Lessening harms associated with drug use and related behaviors that increase the risk of infectious diseases, including providing HIV and viral hepatitis testing and prevention services; and
- Reducing infectious disease transmission among people who use drugs.

We strongly believe that individuals inherently deserve services that promote health, regardless of whether they use drugs. Evidence-based harm reduction strategies minimize negative consequences of drug use. With overdose deaths surpassing 100,000 in a single year, the time is now for Congress to fully fund programs at both the CDC and SAMHSA to increase access to these proven effective programs and save the lives of thousands of Americans battling substance use disorders.

We appreciate your continued leadership as the country faces this crisis, and we welcome additional follow up. Please contact Rachel Klein, Deputy Executive Director, The AIDS Institute at rklein@taimail.org.

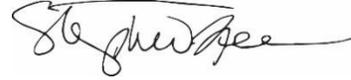
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