

February 28, 2022

The Honorable Xavier Becerra
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20201

Director Rahul Gupta
Office of National Drug Control Policy
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Secretary Becerra and Director Gupta,

As you are well aware, the United States is in the midst of an unprecedented and horrific overdose crisis. Last year, more than 100,000 Americans lost their lives to overdose. At the same time, HIV transmissions among people who use drugs have risen over the past 5 years as HIV incidence has fallen across the general population, and rates of viral hepatitis transmission among people who inject drugs continue to skyrocket. We are in a state of crisis and our nation's response to the overdose epidemic must reflect this.

Given this public health emergency, we must express our deep concern regarding the Administration's response to media distortions leveled against the Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) for the \$30 million in SAMHSA harm reduction funding. The use of the term "crack pipe" is not a technical term but a racist trope specifically targeting Black people. We note that crystal methamphetamine, more associated with drug use among rural white people, is also used with a glass pipe but was not mentioned in the conservative media that chose the most stigmatizing language that they could, creating a racist dog whistle. Additionally, while white people have used crack cocaine at similar rates, demonization of crack use led to a 100-to-1 (now 18-to-1) federal sentencing disparity between crack and powder cocaine despite the fact these substances are chemically the same. Such stigmatizing terminology fails to reflect the science and lived experience that smoking cocaine, methamphetamine or other drugs is in and of itself less dangerous than injection drug use. Additionally, policies and laws continue to cause harm through racial disparities in the criminal legal system and reduced access to life-saving services, such as harm reduction and drug treatment, for Black people and other people of color who are disproportionately impacted by the overdose crisis.

The landscape of substance use in the US is constantly shifting, but one thing that we can be sure of is that the drug supply is getting progressively less stable. Adulterants are now appearing in all forms of illicit drugs, including smokable stimulants. Individuals using smokable stimulants often have no idea that their drugs may contain powerful manufactured opiates; some may not even be familiar with opioid overdose response or carry naloxone. For that

reason, among several others, it is critically important to ensure that targeted outreach to people who smoke stimulants is a major part of harm reduction programming and overdose response.

The harm reduction community has been encouraged by the support the Biden-Harris Administration has given to evidence-based approaches to addressing the overdose crisis. In particular, we appreciate the administration's stated drug policy priorities, "Advancing racial equity issues in our approach to drug policy," and "Enhancing evidence-based harm reduction efforts." We believe that these priorities have the potential to enhance the U.S. response to increasing overdoses. We were additionally pleased by the inclusion of \$30 million of harm reduction funding in the American Rescue Plan Act. It is clear that this administration is serious about leading with science when confronting the overdose crisis, and that the punitive approaches of the failed war on drugs must be redirected.

We urge the Biden Administration to implement the following:

- a) Remove the federal funding ban on purchasing syringes and other drug paraphernalia for the prevention of infectious disease and overdose deaths.
- b) Invest in the types of evidence based harm reduction interventions that will curb the HIV, viral hepatitis, and overdose crises, beginning with a request in the FY23 Budget for \$150 million to the CDC's Opioid Related Infectious Diseases Programs.
- c) Reduce regulatory barriers to ensure increased access to buprenorphine and methadone as evidence-based treatments for opioid use disorder for all people who use drugs that want it.
- d) Allow states and municipalities to operate life-saving Overdose Prevention Centers without interference from the federal government.

We urge the Biden-Harris Administration to pursue its public commitment to end the overdose crisis, advance racial equity and reduce stigma in its approach to drug policy and to enhance evidence-based harm reduction efforts that will save lives. We ask that the Administration work with people engaged in lifesaving harm reduction when the next media distortions emerge to set the record straight and to respond with greater nuance. People who use drugs and harm reductionists need the support of the Biden-Harris Administration to ensure that harm reduction is scaled up to fully respond to increasing overdoses and infectious disease transmission.

We ask finally that harm reduction practitioners and people who use drugs continue to be a resource to you and hope that this letter will serve as a springboard for further discussion on how we can end the overdose crisis together. Harm reductionists are fighting an uphill battle against an overdose crisis that shows little sign of abating soon with little funding and heavy hearts as our friends and family and colleagues are routinely taken from us. We ask the Administration to stand beside us to maintain its public commitment to advancing racial equity and reducing stigma in its approach to drug policy. We also must insist that the Administration not only trust the science of harm reduction but also pushes back when it is attacked with stigmatizing racist tropes rife with misinformation.

To that end, we request that you 1) meet directly with harm reduction programs engaged in safer smoking supplies distribution and outreach to people who smoke drugs, to share their insights and experiences with these harm reduction strategies and better inform the Administration's understanding of their role in public health and 2) that you meet regularly with the Justice Roundtable Harm Reduction Working Group and others. These meetings would foster understanding and alignment around harm reduction priorities, strategies, and messaging, including the vital challenge of resisting racialized stigma and fostering broader consensus across partisan lines.

Thank you for your commitment to working on these urgent issues impacting individuals, families and communities nationwide. If you have questions or need additional information please do not hesitate to contact William McColl, Chair of the Harm Reduction Working Group at 202-595-4167 at mccollbusiness@gmail.com.

Sincerely,

List of National Organizations:

A Little Piece of Light

Academy of Perinatal Harm Reduction

AIDS United

American Academy of HIV Medicine

amfAR, The Foundation for AIDS Research

AnKa Consulting LLC

Association for Ambulatory Behavioral Healthcare

Association of Asian Pacific Community Health Organizations (AAPCHO)

AVAC

Behavioral Health Leadership Institute

Best Practices Policy Project

Big Cities Health Coalition

Black AIDS Institute

Black Harm Reduction Network

Blacks in Law Enforcement of America

Blaque Women Rising

Broken No More

Caring Ambassadors Program

Center for Employment Opportunities

Center for LGBTQ Economic Advancement & Research (CLEAR)

Center for Popular Democracy

CenterLink: The Community of LGBT Centers

CHLP

Clergy For a New Drug Policy

Dave Purchase Project/NASEN

Defending Rights & Dissent

Drug Policy Alliance

Equality Federation

Fair and Just Prosecution

Faith in Harm Reduction

Faith in Public Life

Fast-Track Cities Institute

Funders Concerned About AIDS

GLMA: Health Professionals Advancing LGBTQ Equality

Global Liver Institute

Healing Equity and Liberation (HEAL)

HealthHIV

HIV Dental Alliance

In The Works

Incarcerated Nation Network

Institutes for Behavior Resources, Inc.

International Association of Providers of AIDS Care

InterReligious Task Force on Central America

John Snow, Inc.

Justice Strategies

Juvenile Law Center

Lambda Legal Defense & Education Fund, Inc.

Latino Commission on AIDS

Law Enforcement Action Partnership

Legal Action Center

MomsRising

Musicians For Overdose Prevention

NAADAC, the Association for Addiction Professionals

NASTAD

National Association of Addiction Treatment Providers

National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers

National Center for Advocacy and Recovery for Behavioral Health

National Harm Reduction Coalition

National Health Care for the Homeless Council

National Health Law Program

National Pain Advocacy Center

National Viral Hepatitis Roundtable

National Working Positive Coalition

NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice

NEXT Distro

NMAC

Oasis Legal Services

PAIN

Partnership to End Addiction

People's Action

Positive Women's Network-USA

PrEP4All

Prevention Access Campaign - U=U

Reframe Health and Justice

Remedy Alliance

Sero Project

Stop Stigma Now

StoptheDrugWar.org

Students for Sensible Drug Policy

The AIDS Institute

The Hepatitis C Mentor and Support Group-HCMSG

Transforming Reentry Services/MWIPM

Transgender Law Center

Treatment Action Group

United Church of Christ, Justice and Local Church Ministries

URGE: Unite for Reproductive & Gender Equity

USU

Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA)

Women's Community Justice Association

Young People in Recovery

List of State Organizations:

Alabama

AIDS Alabama South, LLC.

Alabama Regional Medical Services

GoodWorks: North AL Harm Reduction

Arizona

Circle the City

Rooted Community Acupuncture & Holistic Care

Shot in the Dark

Southwest Recovery Alliance

California

APLA Health

Arlene & Michael Rosen Foundation

COVID Clinic, Inc.

DAP Health

Equality California

Face to Face/Sonoma County AIDS Network

Harm Reduction Coalition of San Diego ON POINT

Harm Reduction Services

HIV Education and Prevention Project of Alameda County

Homeless Health Care Los Angeles

MCAVHN Care and Prevention Network

San Francisco AIDS Foundation

San Francisco Department of Public Health

The Spahr Center/Syringe Access Program

Colorado

Boulder County AIDS Project (BCAP)

Colorado Coalition for the Homeless

Colorado Health Network

Colorado Individuals and Organizations Responding to HIV AIDS

Harm Reduction Action Center

One Colorado

District of Columbia

HIPS DC

Rebuilding Independence My Style

Florida

Florida Opiate Coalition

Florida Rising

Miami Coalition to Advance Racial Equity

NEU Health Solutions, Inc

Rad Heartstrings Florida, Inc

Southeast Florida Recovery Advocates, Inc

Georgia

Phoenix Transition Program

Hawaii

Drug Policy Forum of Hawai'i

Hep Free Hawaii

Kaipuokauaolu, LLC

Idaho

Idaho Harm Reduction Project

Iowa

Iowa Harm Reduction Coalition

Positive Iowans Taking Charge (PITCH)

Illinois

AIDS Foundation Chicago

Center for Housing & Health

Chicago Drug Users' Union

Drug Users Health Collective of Chicago

Duneys Defense

Heartland Alliance Health

Howard Brown Health

Illinois Harm Reduction and Recovery Coalition

Live4Lali, Inc.

Phoenix Center

Recovery Options Champaign

The Night Ministry

The Perfectly Flawed Foundation

Indiana

HIV Modernization Movement-Indiana

Holding Space Recovery Project

Hoosier Action

Indiana Recovery Alliance

Louisiana

CrescentCare

Trystereo/New Orleans Harm Reduction Collective

Massachusetts

Material Aid and Advocacy Program

New England Drug Users Union Eastern Massachusetts Branch

New England Users Union/HRH413

Smoke Works

Tapestry Health Systems Inc.

Whose Corner Is It Anyway

Maryland

Addiction Connections Resource

Advocacy and Training Center

AIDS Action Baltimore

Baltimore Harm Reduction Coalition

Communities United

Health Care for the Homeless (Baltimore)

MD Coalition of Families

Mental Health Association of Maryland

National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence-Maryland

NCADD Maryland

Voices of Hope, Inc.

Maine

Amistad

Health Equity Alliance

Maine Access Points

Maine Council of Churches

Maine Drug Policy Lab at Colby College

Maine People's Alliance

Needlepoint Sanctuary

The REST Center

Michigan

Flint Rising

Harm Reduction Michigan

Michigan United

Minnesota

Augsburg University

Harm Reduction Sisters

Rural AIDS Action Network (RAAN)

Missouri

Communities Creating Opportunity

MO Network

North Carolina

Action Institute NC

ekiM For Change

Fruit of Labor Action Research & Technical Assistance, LLC

Holler Harm Reduction

NC Council of Churches

NC Survivors Union

North Carolina AIDS Action Network

North Carolina Harm Reduction Coalition

Opioid Data Lab at Univ. of North Carolina

Smoky Mountain Harm Reduction

Twin City Harm Reduction Collective

Wilkes Recovery Revolution, Inc.

New Hampshire

Rights and Democracy

New Jersey

New Jersey Harm Reduction Coalition

New Jersey Policy Perspective

Newark Community Street Team

NJ Hepatitis Coalition

Salvation and Social Justice

South Jersey AIDS Alliance

New Mexico

Casa de Salud

New Mexico DanceSafe

New Mexico Harm Reduction Collaborative inc

NM Integrative Wellness MRC

Santa Fe Community Services

Taos LEAD

The Mountain Center

Transgender Resource Center of New Mexico

Nevada

Make the Road Nevada

Prison Families Alliance

New York

Alliance for Positive Change

Callen-Lorde Community Health Center

Care For the Homeless

College & Community Fellowship

Community Action for Social Justice

GMHC

Housing Works, Inc.

NDRI Swan Project

Southern Tier AIDS Program

Unity Fellowship of Christ Church NYC

VOCAL-NY

Ohio

Community Medical Services

Equitas Health

Harm Reduction Ohio

Ohio Organizing Collaborative

OhioCAN (Change Addiction Now)

Opportunities People's Justice Leaders

Policy Matters Ohio

Project White Butterfly

River Valley Organizing

Say it Loud Columbus

Scioto county harm reduction

Showing Up for Racial Justice Ohio

Thrive Peer Recovery Services

United Returning Citizens

Writers in Residence

Oregon

Portland Drug Users Union

Pennsylvania

ACT UP Philadelphia (AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power)

Angels in Motion

Clean & Sober Greetings

Families & Youth Innovations +

Friends of Safehouse

Operation in My Back Yard

Philadelphia Overdose Prevention Network

Prevention Point Pittsburgh

Puerto Rico

Bill's Kitchen, Inc.

Coalición de Coaliciones Pro Personas sin Hogar de PR, Inc.

The Puerto Rico Project

Rhode Island

Project Weber/RENEW

Tennessee

Street Works

Texas

CURE (Citizens United for Rehabilitation of Errants)

Utah

Martindale Clinic

One Voice Recovery, Inc.

Virginia

Friends of Guest House

Washington

VOCAL-WA

West Virginia

Mountain State Harm Reduction

NAMI Huntington

West Virginia Hepatitis Academic Mentoring Partnership

WV Citizen Action Group

Wisconsin

FORGE, Inc.

Vivent Health