

April 13, 2021

Dear Chairwoman Eshoo & House Energy and Commerce Health Subcommittee,

We are reaching out to submit a statement for the record concerning the Subcommittee on Health of the Committee on Energy and Commerce legislative hearing on April 14, 2021, entitled “An Epidemic within a Pandemic: Understanding Substance Use and Misuse in America.” Thank you for hosting such an important hearing. No matter what we look like or where we come from, the overdose crisis reminds us that at our core we are all human. Our ability to get and stay well depends on everyone having what we need to prevent, treat, and recover from illness.

People’s Action is a national network of 40 state and local grassroots, power-building organizations across 30 states with 1 million members, united in fighting for justice. People’s Action’s Overdose Crisis Cohort works to uplift the long-running epidemic of overdose in the United States. We are people who use drugs, people in recovery, harm reductionists, and people who have lost loved ones due to the War on Drugs and the Overdose Crisis. We come from urban, small town, suburban and rural communities and from Black, white, and brown constituencies. We are united by our shared experiences as survivors of the failed war on drugs and the overdose crisis. Together we are taking action for a future where all of us are valued and supported to live fulfilling, healthy lives - no matter our relationship to substances.

As you well know, the United States is currently in the midst of an overdose crisis. In order to stop the unprecedented overdose pandemic ravaging our communities, Congress must follow science and lead with compassion that invests in evidence-based treatment and harm reduction solutions. Criminalization of drug use does not and has never saved lives. We must leave this failed approach behind if we intend to end the overdose crisis.

We write to express our support for H.R. 1384 The Mainstreaming Addiction Treatment Act of 2021 and H.R. 2366 Support, Treatment and Overdose Prevention of Fentanyl Act of 2021. Both of these pieces of legislation will effectively reduce overdose deaths by undoing the harm of the War on Drugs that pharmaceutical and insurance corporations have exacerbated and expanded the scope of the catastrophe. H.R. 1384 and H.R. 2366 follow the lead of science and focus on immediately saving lives.

H.R. 1384 (the MAT Act) would eliminate the DATA 2000 WAIVER requirement that discourages practitioners from integrating treatment in their practices and perpetuates stigma in the medical community against patients who would benefit from buprenorphine treatment. From our members on the ground from Indiana to Vermont to North Carolina - we have heard time and time again the challenge to accessing medication assisted treatment (MAT).

“On March 8th of 2018, my nephew, Kaya Siegel, whose upbringing I was a big part of died of an overdose, after a year in recovery. He was the son of my brother, Johnathon Siegel who died just over 20 years before also while using heroin. Throughout the 7 years of Kaya’s battle with substance use disorder, the most prominent recurring theme was that he could not consistently access Buprenorphine. What I did not know then, but do know now, is that the barriers to becoming a MAT provider are huge and they are stigma based rules based on harmful Drug War policies. People in my rural state of Vermont are sometimes having to travel three hours every day to access Buprenorphine because there are no providers near them or the rules for access require them to go to a particular location.” - Brenda Siegel, member-leader at Rights and Democracy Vermont

Medication assisted treatment is the gold-standard of treatment and one that anyone seeking treatment for opioid-use disorder should be able to access.

“With MAT I can contain my substance use without losing my quality of life and struggling. Forced and voluntary abstinence has never worked for me. This form of treatment (MAT) is good for my loved ones as well. If I am not dealing with the negative effects of my use and not using chaotically I have more time to be well around my family and enjoy a better quality of life with them.” - Brendan Coughenour, member-leader at New Jersey Organizing Project

To effectively respond to the urgency of the overdose epidemic, we need to eliminate barriers that prevent healthcare practitioners from providing evidence-based treatment for substance use disorders such as MAT. Removing the X-Waiver through passing H.R. 1384 is an essential step to ensure that those who want treatment are able to receive it.

H.R. 2366 (the STOP Fentanyl Act) packages together policies that bolster surveillance and research, deploy resources to combat overdose deaths, connect individuals with treatment programs, and support on-going prevention and public safety activities. Criminalization of the current public health crisis has been proven ineffective time and time again.

“We’re at a historic moment, and the US just keeps using the same tired tactics that it’s used for over 100 years - increased criminalization. This does not work, but instead causes harm and violence in Black, brown, and low-income communities. Overdoses are higher now than they ever have been, and increased criminalization will inevitably dismantle public health efforts. If we truly want to turn the tide on this devastating crisis, we need to implement evidence-based solutions, not fear based, draconian policies that cause more trauma and deaths.” - Jasmine Budnella, Director of Drug Policy at VOCAL NY

Punitive measures to address drug use have only proven to increase loss of life. Through this legislation, Congress can help communities address the rise in synthetic opioids without punitive measures that lead to mass incarceration and further fuel the failed drug war.

Thank you for hosting this important hearing, and we look forward to seeing solutions advanced to save lives.

Sincerely,



Ellen Glover
Drug Policy, Harm Reduction and Criminal Justice Campaign Director
People's Action

Overdose Crisis Cohort Member Organizations:

IN - Hoosier Action

MD - Progressive Maryland

ME - Maine People's Alliance

MI - Michigan United

NC - Down Home North Carolina

NH - Rights and Democracy

NJ - New Jersey Organizing Project

NY - Voices of Community Activists and Leaders NY (VOCAL-NY)

OH - River Valley Organizing/UnHarming Ohio

OH - Showing Up for Racial Justice - Ohio (SURJ-Ohio)

VT - Rights and Democracy

WV - Solutions Oriented Addiction Response in WV (SOAR-WV)