

Sen. Portman, save Ohio lives by supporting the MAT and STOP Fentanyl acts: Justin Hanley

By [Guest Columnist, cleveland.com](#)



Iraq War veteran Justin Hanley of Portsmouth, Ohio, became addicted to opioids when he self-medicated for his undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder. Now he helps other addicts kick their habits as a harm reduction provider at River Valley Organizing. In a guest column today, he urges Sen. Rob Portman of Ohio to help in this effort by supporting the Mainstreaming Addiction Treatment (MAT) Act and STOP Fentanyl Act in the U.S. Senate. (Photo by Brandi N. Hanley)

PORTSMOUTH, Ohio -- Fentanyl. It's the highly potent synthetic opioid driving a massive surge in overdose deaths. Sen. Rob Portman, I think you know this is a crisis we must face right now. But the reasons for this crisis, and what we can do about it, are not what you think.

I should know. I've lost friends to overdose, and nearly died myself. I am an Iraq War veteran and a resident of Portsmouth in the Ohio River Valley. When I returned home from the war, I was eager to jump back into life as a father and reconnect to my community. Unfortunately, though I left the war, the war did not leave me.

With undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder making every moment of my life a battle, I turned to opioids to make the days more bearable. And they were,

for a bit. Pretty soon, though, the once-in-a-while OxyContin morphed into a full-blown dependency on opioids.

Yet as debilitating as my addiction was, my situation was made exponentially worse by the criminalization of drug users that our society has pursued for over 50 years, especially targeting poor people and communities of color. I was arrested time and again and sent to jail, but police and judges couldn't reduce my dependence on opioids -- because I was dealing with a health issue.

It was only thanks to the compassion and nonjudgmental support from a few key people around me that I began to better understand what was happening to me, and overcome my dependency. I was able to get the support that has brought me to the place I am today: happy, healthy, and giving back to my community.

That's what people who use drugs need, and what saves lives: harm reduction; support; and treatment in the communities where they live. This means access to sterile syringes and drug testing kits, and forms of medically assisted treatment (MAT) like buprenorphine so people can move toward recovery. And for all of us, it means learning to administer naloxone, which can reverse an overdose in seconds and save a life.

These are the solutions I advocate for every day in Ohio in my work as a harm reduction provider at River Valley Organizing, part of the People's Action national network.

They are also the solutions in two bills currently before Congress: The [Mainstreaming Addiction Treatment \(MAT\) Act](#) and [STOP Fentanyl Act](#). Despite having wide bipartisan support, these bills have stalled in Congress, preventing communities from having the tools they need to stop overdoses and save lives.

What doesn't save lives? Sending people who use drugs to prison. For

lawmakers, this is the easy way out -- they tell voters they're "tough on crime," and hope they won't notice that criminalization has failed for decades to stop deaths from drug use.

That's why, Sen. Portman, you need to abandon your call [for the permanent classwide scheduling of fentanyl and related substances](#), and get behind the legislation and solutions that center on public health approaches instead. All that drug-scheduling does is send more people who use drugs to jail -- whether or not they knew they were using banned substances -- rather than offer them harm reduction and treatment.

Sen. Portman, we need you to work to pass the MAT Act and STOP Fentanyl Act now, so lives can be saved, and so that those who struggle with drugs can find what they need to heal. To do this will take compassion and courage -- from every one of us, and from lawmakers like you -- to create a world where people have access to lifesaving care and where everyone can thrive.

Justin Hanley is an Iraq War veteran in Portsmouth, Ohio.

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