

Media Contact
Adam Handelsman
(512) 363-0594
adam@specopscomm.com

Nation's Leading Drug Policy Experts Demand Medication Assisted Treatment and COVID-19: Treatment Reforms

During the COVID-19 pandemic, it is critical to remember that we are still in the midst of an overdose crisis. While many regulators have argued that methadone and buprenorphine policies must be deliberately restrictive due to the risk of overdose, adverse medication effects, and medication diversion, the COVID-19 crisis has forced many regulating bodies to re-evaluate these policies in order to comply with the urgent need for communities to practice social distancing and sheltering-in-place. Multiple government agencies including SAMHSA, the DEA, Medicare, and Medicaid have recently announced policy changes to allow for more flexible prescribing and dispensing. While these changes are a step forward, clinics have been either reluctant or resistant to fully implement them to the extent allowable under law. In light of the evolving pandemic and the needs of the community, we must not allow fears of overmedication and diversion to outweigh the health risks caused by patients being forced daily to congregate in large groups, or being driven to an adulterated illicit drug supply.

Close person-to-person contact and group assembly are currently actions deemed hazardous to public health. Unfortunately, "sheltering in place" is unrealistic for many people who use drugs. People who use opioids are either forced to continue to engage with the illicit drug market or must comply with prohibitive and insurmountable requirements to receive medications for Opioid Use Disorder (OUD). Many opioid users are at an increased risk of COVID-19 infection due to being immunocompromised and/or having comorbid health conditions.

In order to reduce the risk of COVID-19 infection, involuntary withdrawal, and drug poisoning, the Urban Survivors Union and the undersigned organizations strongly recommend the following measures be taken immediately:

- 1) The only acceptable standard for discharge of patients from OUD treatment during the COVID-19 outbreak shall be violent behavior that would endanger their own health and safety or that of other patients or staff.
- 2) Administrative detox shall be fully suspended during the pandemic and patients shall be provided the opportunity to request dose increases as needed, given that the illicit drug market will continue to experience fluctuations and patients need access to these life-saving medications. Patient doses shall not be reduced during the transition to take-home care unless they request adjustments to their doses, or documented medical emergencies require it and patients cannot consent due to medical crises, as may be the case with severe respiratory distress resulting from COVID-19 infection.
- 3) Referrals for COVID-19 testing shall be made available at all opioid treatment programs (OTPs), as well as syringe service programs. Staff shall receive training to recognize the symptoms of COVID-19 and be familiarized with protocols to refer patients for further testing. Harm reduction providers can also play an essential role in "flattening the curve" of transmission by identifying cases, making medical attention available to those who test positive, and teaching life-saving harm reduction skills to help people stay safe during this crisis. Plain language and evidence-based public health materials about COVID-19 prevention, symptom identification, and treatment should be available in locally prominent languages at all locations for participants and their communities.
- 4) During the COVID-19 national emergency, healthcare professionals--including doctors, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, and pharmacists--shall not be required to complete the previously-mandated training and waiver to prescribe these medications, thereby making MAT available in all settings. Prescribers shall not have limitations on the number of patients that they can treat. Naloxone and other overdose prevention tools (i.e. fentanyl test strips) shall be prescribed or made available with all dispensed medications in compliance with state law.
- 5) Opioid treatment programs (OTPs), prescribing clinicians, and pharmacies shall actively work to expand access to methadone treatment through the medical maintenance/office-based and pharmacy-delivery methods currently allowed by federal exception/waiver. The existing OTP regulations for the dispensing of MAT shall be temporarily adjusted to require all pharmacies to dispense these medications. This will reduce the risks of transmission associated with daily clinic attendance and person-to-person contact. In accordance with SAMHSA recommendations, lockbox requirements for take-home dispensing shall be suspended. Standard dispensing protocols for other opioid medications are deemed sufficient, since child- and tamper-proof bottles are already in use for methadone and buprenorphine. (Per SAMHSA's TIP 43, Chapter 5: "Some programs require

patients to bring a locked container to the OTP when they pick up their take-home medication to hold it while in transit. This policy should be considered carefully because most such containers are large and visible, which might serve more to advertise that a patient is carrying medication than to promote safety.")

- 6) Take-home exception privileges shall be expanded to the maximum extent possible, limited only by available supply and operations for delivery. Any bottle checks that clinics wish to conduct shall be conducted by tele-medicine. Take-home schedules shall be authorized for individuals in all medical settings, including pharmacies and mobile vans. In light of new SAMHSA guidelines, clinics shall allow 14 to 28 days of take-home privileges to as many patients as possible. Patients testing positive for benzodiazepine or alcohol use shall be allowed the take-home privileges outlined in SAMHSA guidelines, but may be additionally required to check in via telemedicine for the purpose of decreasing the risk of adverse reactions, including overdose. Access to take-home doses is critical to keep patients engaged and retained in treatment.
- 7) Telehealth and service by phone shall replace any and all in-person requirements and appointments as the primary means of service provision until social distancing guidelines change. Toxicology requirements shall be suspended for the duration of telehealth-based services. Telemedicine services shall include waivered platforms, such as telephone intakes and video conferencing, as some patients may have different access needs.
- 8) The regulatory in-person requirements for methadone inductions shall be lifted in order to be consistent with the new policy changes for buprenorphine inductions. Clinic-based in-person appointments shall conform to social distancing requirements and OSHA guidelines for the management of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 9) DEA restrictions on mobile medication units shall be revised to accommodate delivery of medications to individuals who are sequestered in their homes, are quarantined, or live in rural communities that are 15 miles or more from the nearest opioid treatment program.
- 10) State and federal Medicaid dollars shall be expanded to cover all costs for take-home medications not otherwise covered by insurance for patients experiencing financial hardship due to COVID-19. In states that did not expand Medicaid, the state shall be the payor of last resort.

In the interest of saving lives and adhering to existing public health protocol for management of COVID-19 transmission, it is necessary to make significant revisions to existing regulatory standards. This is a critical time to take decisive action for the protection of patients, providers, their families, and the community. As our healthcare system reaches full capacity and becomes overburdened by COVID-19-related emergencies, as seen in Italy and Spain, providers on the front lines will be forced

to make life and death choices. These recommendations outline a plan of primary prevention that will minimize the burden on our healthcare system and save lives during this national emergency.

We, the undersigned, are a coalition of direct service providers, community advocates, public health officials, medical professionals, human rights groups, people in recovery, treatment professionals, members of impacted communities, and many others. We ask SAMHSA, the DEA, and all other federal, state, and local regulatory bodies and health authorities to adopt these recommendations fully and immediately in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Urban Survivors Union

Louise Vincent, MPH

Executive Director

National Harm Reduction Coalition

Monique Tula

Executive Director

The National Alliance for Medication-Assisted

Recovery

Zachary Talbott, MSW

President

Joycelyn S. Woods, MA

Executive Director

Faces and Voices of Recovery

Patty McCarthy, M.S.

Chief Executive Officer

National Viral Hepatitis Roundtable

Lauren Canary, MPH

Director

Law Enforcement Action Partnership

Major Neill Franklin (Ret.)

Executive Director

The Levenson Foundation

Benjamin A. Levenson

Chairman

Foundation for Recovery

Dona M. Dmitrovic, MHS

Executive Director

National Council for Behavioral Health

Chuck Ingoglia

President and CEO

Drug Policy Alliance

Kassandra Frederique

Managing Director, Policy Advocacy &

Campaigns

International Certification & Reciprocity

Consortium

Crystal Smalldon, CCAC, CIAC, RSSW

President

Behavioral Health Association of Providers

Pete Nielsen, MA, LAADC

CEO

Center on Addiction / Partnership for Drug-

Free Kids

Frederick Muench, Ph.D.

President

National Advocates for Pregnant Women

Lynn M. Paltrow, J.D.

Founder and Executive Director

Recovery Advocacy Project

Ryan Hampton

Organizing Director

Open Society Foundations

Sarah Evans

Unit Manager, Public Health Program

Kasia Malinowska-Sempruch

Director, Global Drug Policy Program

305 Psychotherapy Group

Mark Houston, LCSW

Owner and Psychotherapist

Addiction Professionals of North Carolina

Sarah Potter, MPA

Executive Director

AIDS United

Drew Gibson, MSW

Policy Manager for HIV & Drug User Health

Alcohol & Drug Abuse Certification Board of

Georgia

Amanda Finley

Executive Director

Alliance for Positive Health

Diana Aguglia

Regional Director

The BALM Training Institute for Family

Recovery Services/Family Recovery Resources

Beverly A Buncher, MA, CBFRLC, PCC

Chief Executive Officer

Bay Area Workers Support

Maxine Holloway, MPH

Co-Founder

Benevolence Farm

Kristen Powers

Interim Executive Director

Better Life in Recovery/Springfield Recovery

Community Center

David Stoecker, LCSW

Executive Director

BioMed Behavioral Healthcare, Inc

Brian A McCarroll DO. MS. ABAM

CEO, President

Brave Technology Coop

Gordon Casey

Chief Executive Officer

Broken No More

Tamara Olt, M.D.

Executive Director

CADA of Northwest Louisiana

Bill Rose, LAC, CCS, CCGC

Executive Director

C4 Recovery Foundation, Inc.

Ricard Ohrstrom, Chairman

Jack O'Donnell, CEO

Center for Optimal Living

Andrew Tatarsky, Ph.D.

Executive Director

Center for Popular Democracy/ Opioid

Network

Jennifer Flynn Walker

Senior Director of Advocacy and Mobilization

Central Texas Harm Reduction

Richard Bradshaw

Community Outreach Leader

CheckUpandChoices.com

Reid K Hester, Ph.D.

Director, Research Division

Chicago Drug Users Union

Peter Moinichen, CADC, CODP, MAATP

Co-Founder

Chicago Recovery Alliance

Brandie Wilson

Choices Recovery Trainings

Ginger Ross, CRSW, NCPRSS

Owner/Trainer

Church of Safe Injection

Kari Morissette

Director

Circle for Justice Innovations

Aleah Bacqui Vaughn

Executive Director

City of Revere - Substance Use Disorder

Initiatives Office

Julia Newhall, BSW, CPS

Director

Coastal Holistic Care

Jessi Ross

Founder

Connecticut Certification Board

Jeff Quamme, MSW

Executive Director

DanceSafe

Mitchell Gomez

Executive Director

Desiree Alliance

Cristine Sardina, BWS, MSJ

Director

društvo AREAL

Janko Belin

President

ekiM For Change

Diannee Carden Glenn

Director

Exponents, Inc.

Joseph Turner, J.D.

President and CEO

Faith In Public Life

Blyth Barnow, MDiv

Harm Reduction Faith Manager

Families for Sensible Drug Policy

Carol Katz-Beyer

President

Florida Opiate Coalition- Block by Block

Bonny Batchelor

Director

Foundation for Recovery

Dona M. Dmitrovic, MHS

Executive Director

Full Circle Recovery Center, LLC

Stephanie Almeida, CDAC

Founder

Georgia Overdose Prevention

Laurie Fuggitt, RN and Robin Elliott, RN

Co-Founder

GoodWorks: North Alabama Harm Reduction

Morgan Farrington

Founder

The Grand Rapids Red Project

Stephen Alsum

Grayken Center for Addiction, Boston Medical

Center

Michael Botticelli, MEd Executive Director

Greater Hartford Harm Reduction Coalition Inc.

Mark A. Jenkins Executive Director

Guilford County Solution to the Opioid

Problem

Chase Holleman, LCSW, LCAS

Program Director

Harm Reduction Action Center

Lisa Raville

Executive Director

Harm Reduction Ohio

Dennis Cauchon

President

Harm Reduction Therapy Center

Jeannie Little, LCSW Executive Director

Health in Justice Action Lab

Leo Beletsky, JD MPH

Director

Health Professionals in Recovery

William C. Kinkle, RN, EMT-P, CRS

Co-Owner

Health Services Center, Inc.

Melissa Parker

Prevention Projects Director

Healthy Streets / Health Innovations

Mary Wheeler Program Manager

ael Botticelli, MEd

Tamika Spellman
Policy and Advocacy Associate

HIV/HCV Resource Center

Laura Byrne, MA
Executive Director

Hope Recovery Resources

Beth Fisher Sanders, LCSW, LCAS, MAC, CCS,

MATS

HIPS

Chief Executive Officer

HRH413

Albert Park, MSW

Co-Founder

International Network of People Who Use

Drugs

Judy Chang

Executive Director

Illinois Association of Behavioral Health

Sara Howe, MDA Executive Director

Inclusion Recovery

Dan Ronken, LPC, LAC

Founder

Indiana Recovery Alliance

Kass Botts

Executive Director

Innovative Health Systems

Ross Fishman, Ph.D.

President

Instituto RIA

Zara Snapp

Co-Founder

Iowa Harm Reduction Coalition

Sarah Ziegenhorn

Executive Director

Katal Center for Health, Equity, and Justice

Gabriel Sayegh, MPH Co-Executive Director

The Lemire Group LLC
Dean Lemire

Owner

Lifespan Counseling

Dene Berman, Ph.D., MPH, ABPP, MAC

Director

Lysistrata Mutual Care and Collective Fund

Cora Colt

Co-Founder and Treasurer

MEDPEARL LLC

Deanna Dunn, PharmD Owner/Pharmacist

The Middle East and North African Network of/for People who use Drugs

Hasan Taraif

Executive Director

Minnesota Recovery Connection

Wendy Jones

Executive Director

Movement for Family Power

Lisa Sangoi and Erin Coud

Co-Founders and Co-Directors

NCADD-NJ

Heather Ogden, CPRS, CRSP, CADC Intern

Advocacy Coordinator

New England Users Union

Jess Tilley

Executive Director

New Jersey Harm Reduction Coalition

Jenna Mellor

Executive Director

A New PATH, Parents for Addiction Treatment

& Healing

Gretchen Burns Bergman

Executive Director

New View Addiction Recovery Educational

Center

Jennifer A. Burns, MA

Executive Director

New York Center for Living

Audrey Freshman, Ph.D., LCSW, CASAC

Executive Director/Chief Clinical Officer

New York State Harm Reduction Association

Joseph Turner, J.D.

Co-Chairperson

North American Syringe Exchange Network/

Tacoma Needle Exchange

Paul A. LaKosky, Ph.D.

Executive Director

North Carolina Harm Reduction

Shelisa Howard-Martinez

Executive Director

North Carolina Survivors Union

Louise Vincent, MPH

Northern Berkshire EMS

Stephen Murray, BBA, NRP

Paramedic Supervisor

ONESTOP Harm Reduction Center, North Shore

Health Project

Mary Doneski, MA

Program Manager

PeerNUPS/Athens/Greece

Christos Anastasiou

Coordinator

Pennsylvania Alliance of Recovery Residences

Fred Way, MA

Executive Director

Pennsylvania Harm Reduction Coalition

Devin Reaves, MSW

Executive Director

People's Action

Sondra Youdelman

Campaigns Director

The People's Harm Reduction Alliance

Shilo Jama

Executive Director

The Perfectly Flawed Foundation

Luke Tomsha

Executive Director

Philadelphia Drug Users Union

David Tomlinson, BA

Founder

Project Point Pittsburgh

Alice Bell, LCSW

Overdose Prevention Project Coordinator

Protect Families First

Annajane Yolken

Executive Director

Provenance Counseling

Lisa S Musarra, MSW, LCSW, LCADC, ICADV

Owner

The Reach Project, Inc and Reach Medical, PLLC

Justine Waldman, MD, FACEP

Chief Executive Officer

Reframe Health and Justice

Sasanka Jinadasa

Partner

Rights & Democracy NH, Rights & Democracy

VT, Rights & Democracy Institute

Kate Logan, MA/ABD

Director of Programming & Policy

R Street Institute

Carrie Wade, Ph.D., MPH

Director of Harm Reduction Policy

Chelsea Boyd, MS

Research Associate Harm Reduction Policy

San Francisco AIDS Foundation

Laura Thomas, MPH, MPP

Director of Harm Reduction Policy

The Seven Challenges LLC

Robert Schwebel, Ph.D.

Author and Program Developer

Sex Worker Advocacy Coaltion

Tamika Spellman

Lead Organizer

Sex Workers Outreach Project Behind Bars

Jill McCracken, Ph.D.

Co-Director

Sex Workers Organizing Project- USA

Christa Daring

Executive Director

The Southern Tier AIDS Program

John Barry, LMSW

Executive Director

Students for Sensible Drug Policy

Betty Aldrich

Executive Director

Students For Sensible Drug Policy Africa

Ewelle Sylvester Williams, SW

Vice Chairman

Substance Use, Policy, Education and Recovery

PAC

Haley McKee

Co-Chair

Suncoast Harm Reduction Project

Julia Negron, CAS

Founder and Lead Organizer

Tennessee Recovery Alliance

Sara Alese

Executive Director

Texas Drug User Health Alliance

Mark Kinzly

Executive Director

Texas Harm Reduction Alliance

Joy Rucker

Executive Director

Texas Harm Reduction Conference

Emily Gray

Co-Founder

Texas Overdose Naloxone Initiative

Mark Kinzly

Executive Director

Truth Pharm

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Executive Director

Ukrainian Network of People who Use Drugs

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Missouri Institute of Mental Health

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Addiction Science Faculty

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Vantage Clinical Consulting LLC

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Executive Director

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Caty Simon

Founding Co-Organizer

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Program Director

Zanzibar Network of People Who Use Drugs

Kassim Nyuni

Michelle Accardi-Ravid, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist, Acting Assistant Professor, University of Washington Medical Center/ Harborview Medical Center

Chris Alba, Harm Reduction Specialist, Health Innovations Inc

Onyinye Aleri, Case Manager, Charm City Care Connection

Sarah Baranes, MD Candidate

Anton Basenko, ME, Country Focal Point: PITCH, Alliance for Public Health

Donna Beers, MSN, RN-BC, CARN, Boston Medical Center

Leo Beletsky, J.D., MPH, Health in Justice Action Lab, Northeastern University

Patricia Bellucci, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist/Psychoanalyst

Daniel Bibeau, Ph.D., Professor of Public Health Education, University of North Carolina, Greensboro

F. Michler Bishop, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Director, Alcohol and Substance Abuse Services, Albert Ellis Institute, NY

Ricky N. Bluthenthal, Ph.D., Keck School of Medicine, University of Southern California

Elizabeth Bowen, PhD, Assistant Professor, University at Buffalo School of Social Work

Jennifer J. Carroll, Ph.D., MPH, Assistant Professor, Elon University

Sharon Chancellor, CSAC

Christie Chandler, MA, QP, North Carolina Harm Reduction Coalition

Hong Chen Chung, MD, MPH, Medical Consultant, Community Action Programs Inter-City, Inc

Seth Clark MD, MPH, Assistant Professor of Medicine and Psychiatry and Human Behavior, Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University

Kelley Cohill, LCSW-C

Susan E Collins, Ph.D., Co-Director, Harm Reduction Research and Treatment Center

Erica Darragh, Board Member, Students for Sensible Drug Policy; Chapter Director, DanceSafe

Jane Dicka, Health Promotion Team
Coordinator, Harm Reduction Victoria

Mary Doneski, Program Manager, ONESTOP Harm Reduction Center

Patt Denning, PhD, Director of Clinical Services and Training, Harm Reduction Therapy Center

Cathy Dreifort, Harm Reduction Outreach Specialist, Shot in the Dark

Andria Efthimiou-Mordaunt MSc,
Coordinator, John Mordaunt Trust

Nabila El-Bassel PhD, Director, Social Intervention Group

Taleed El-Sabawi, Assistant Professor, Elon University School of Law

Aaron Ferguson, The Social Exchange Podcast	Jesse Harvey, CIPSS, RCA, Community Organizer, Church of Safe Injection
Anna Fitz-James, MD, MPH	Jennifer I. Healy, Former Director, Bcbsma, Board Member, The Global Recovery
Kathleen Foley, PhD	Movement
Ryan Fowler, CRSW, Harm Reduction Program Coordinator, HIV/HCV Resource Center	Robert Heimer, PhD, Professor of Epidemiology, Yale School of Public Health David Himmelstein, MD
Graeme Fox, Sonoran Prevention Works	David Hillineistein, MD
David Frank, MMT Sociologist, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, New York	Robert Hofmann, U.S. Movement Building Fellow, Students for Sensible Drug Policy
University	Heather Howard, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Florida Atlantic University
Meryl Freedman, M.Ed, Families for Sensible Drug Policy	Sheila Humphrey, Dayton Director, Harm Reduction Ohio
Ann Fuqua, BSN	
Carmen Albizu Garcia, MD	Lauren Jessell, MSW, Senior Research Associate
Angie Geren, APP, CHt, Arizona Recovers	Sterling Johnson, Esq., Organizer, Black and Brown Workers Cooperative
Louisa Gilbert, Co-Director, Social	
Intervention Group	Carol Jones, Director of Harm Reduction, Alliance for Living
Scott Goldberg, MD, Montefiore Medical	
Center	Ashley Jordan, Adjunct Assistant Professor, City University of New York
Judith R. Gordon, Ph.D., University of	
Washington	Sharon Joslin, APRN, Director, Community Health Care Van, Yale University School of
Traci Green, Ph.D., MSc, Opioid Policy Research Collaborative, the Heller School	Medicine
for Social Policy and Management, Brandeis University	Norty Kalishman, MD
Nancy Handmaker, Ph.D., Licensed	Mary E. Kelly, PsyD, Psychologist
Psychologist, Addictions Specialist	Stefan Kertesz, MD, Professor, University of Alabama

Jennifer L Kimball, Berkshire Opioid Addiction Prevention Collaborative	Bethany Medley, MSW, Adjunct Lecturer, Columbia School of Social Work
Bethea Kleykamp, MA, Ph.D., Research Associate Professor, University of Rochester School of Medicine and	Regina McCoy, MPH, MCHES, NBC-HWC, Professor, UNC Greensboro
Dentistry	Ryan McNeil, Ph.D., Assistant Professor & Director of Harm Reduction Research, Yale
Gary Langis, Harm Reduction Specialist, Boston Medical Center	Program in Addiction Medicine, Yale School of Medicine
Bethany Medley, MSW, Adjunct Lecturer, Columbia School of Social Work	Nancy Mullin, MA, PsyD Graduate Student, California Institute of Integral Studies
Rosie Munoz-Lopez, MPH, Research Community Engagement Facilitator, Boston Medical Center	Alicia Murray, DO, Addiction Psychiatrist, General Psychiatrist
Boston Medical Center	Ethan Nadelmann, Founder and former
Janie L Kritzman, Ph.D., Lic. Psychologist, Psychological Associates, MA; NYSPA,	Executive Director, Drug Policy Alliance
Addiction Division	Daniel Nauts, MD, FASAM,
	Consultant/trainer, Montana Primary Care
Dana Kurzer-Yashin, Overdose and Harm Reduction Trainer, Harm Reduction	Association
Coalition	Tammera V Nauts, LCSW, LAC, IBH
	Director, Montana Primary Care
David Lucas, MSW, Clinical Advisor, Center for Court Innovation	Association
Samuel MacMaster, Ph.D., Associate	Tracy R. Nichols, Ph.D., Department of
Professor, Department of Family and	Public Health Education, University of
Community Health, Baylor College of Medicine	North Carolina, Greensboro
	Danielle C. Ompad, Ph.D., Associate
Priya Mammen, MD, MPH, Physician, Kensington MMT Clinic	Professor, New York University School of Global Public Health
Marilena Marchetti, Co-Director, Liquid Handcuffs	Caitlin O'Neill, Director of Harm Reduction Services, New Jersey Harm Reduction Coalition
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Director, CONNECT

Dinah Ortiz, NCSU Board Member

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Ju Nyeong Park, Assistant Scientist, Johns Hopkins University	Medicine, Brown Emergency Medicine
John P Pasagiannis, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist	Vanessa Santana, Recovery Coach, Turning Point Recovery Center
Stanton Peele, J.D., Ph.D., Founder, The Life Process Program	Carolyn Sartor, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Yale School of Medicine
Bonnie A Peirano, MPH, Ph.D.	Roxanne Saucier, MPH
Sandra F Penn, MD, FAAFP	Jacob Schonberg, CPSS, Social Work Practitioner, UNC School of Medicine
Kim Powers, Drug User Health Outreach Coordinator, AIDS Support Group Cape Cod	Mark Schulz, Associate Professor, University of North Carolina, Greensboro
Garrett Reuscher, CASAC, MSW student, Social Intern, Footsteps	Mandy Sladky RN, MSN, CARN, Opioid Project Manager and OBOT RN, Public
Helen Redmond, LCSW, Adjunct Faculty,	Health Seattle & King County
Silver School of Social Work, New York University, and Co-Director of Liquid Handcuffs	Samuel Snodgrass, Ph.D., Board Member, Broken No More
Tina Reynolds, Program Director, Circle for Justice Innovations	Nicole Spector, RN, BSN, Health Innovations Inc
	Annie Steinberg, President, GW Chapter
Kathran Richardson, PRSS, Potomac Highlands Guild	Students for Sensible Drug Policy
Lindon Doborto MCM NCCII Boord	Dr. Laura Stern, Sage Neuroscience Center
Lindsay Roberts, MSW, NCSU Board Member and Sex Worker Liaison	Janet K Stoltenborg, MS, MBA, Member,
Patrick Roff, Curriculum and Training Developer, Prevention is Key/CARES	Moms for All Paths to Recovery from Addiction
Lila Rosenbloom, MSW	Phillip Stracener, NCCPSS, BSW, Harm Reduction Specialist, AIDS Leadership Foothills-Area Alliance

Gabi Teed, BSW, CRSW, Perinatal SUD Care Coordinator, Amoskeag Health

Matthew Tice, LCSW, Pathways to Housing PA

Denise Tomasini-Joshi, J.D., MIA, Division Director, Open Society Foundations

Bruce G. Trigg, MD, Public Health and Addiction Medicine Consultant

Mary Kay Villaverde, M.S., Board Member, Families for Sensible Drug Policy

Ingrid Walker, Ph.D., Associate Professor, University of Washington, Tacoma

GracieLee Weaver, PhD, MPH, CHES, NBC-HWC, University of North Carolina, Greensboro

Steffie Woolhandler, MD, MPH

Tyler Yates, CPSS, CADC-I, Syringe
Exchange Program Coordinator, Guilford
County Solution to the Opioid Problem

M. Scott Young, Research Associate Professor, University of South Florida

Jon E. Zibbell, PhD, Senior Scientist, RTI International / Emory University

Individuals: Allies

Sarah Beale

Jade Bower

Thomas Butler

Teri Cole-Smith

Elizabeth C. Day

Joseph Dishman

Nora Maria Fuller

Paul Gorman

Melvina Hall

Christie Hansen

Maggie Hart

Anna Herdlein

Emily Jones

Anna Kistin

Coleda Lee

Rivkah L. Meder

Whitney Meex

Bernadette Proctor

Rachel Rourke

Zach Salazar

Michael G. Seay

Kasey Snider

Zabrina Whiting