



Activating Philanthropic Support of General Addiction Issues in the U.S.

Written by Sarah Twardock, MBA

In a nation sharply divided by the reality they experience based on where they live, politics, and diverging visions for the future, U.S. leadership and citizens at large continue to recognize the need for urgent, bipartisan action on one particular issue—the increasing presence of substance use disorders (SUD) and overdose cases every year.

The opioid and overdose epidemics predate the COVID-19 pandemic, yet, the problem is worsening. Early CDC data suggests that the COVID pandemic has contributed to over 81,000 overdose deaths, a record number—as a result of our increased isolation, economic stressors, declining mental health, and decreased access to services. With substance use disorders inextricably linked to our mental and physical health, strategic SUD policy action will be needed to improve well-being in the U.S. at large.

Over the past several years, Congress, federal agencies, and the states, have moved to increase the number of providers who can treat SUDs, expand coverage for evidence-based treatment, and standardize the quality of services. Major federal legislation like the 2018 SUPPORT Act, the billions of dollars allocated to states every year to address the opioid epidemic in local communities, and HHS's recent removal of the special licensing requirement for physicians to prescribe buprenorphine (an effective medication for opioid use disorder (MOUD)), can all help shift our grave reality and provide more people with services that work, when they need them. But, greater engagement is needed across sectors if we are truly to meet people where they are and consistently provide care that can transform and save lives.

Philanthropy is essential to accelerating these changes, strengthening the national response to substance use disorders, and filling in gaps left by the public and private sectors. Philanthropy should take action to:

- Advance strategic SUD research and policy development
- Support advocacy by SUD patient-centered groups
- Fund direct supports for SUD service providers and patients

SUD research and policy development:

The government is emphasizing investment in opportunities to determine which approaches are truly working to save and rebuild lives that include:

- 1) realigning federal MOUD regulations with existing policy and programmatic research,
- 2) advancing opportunities to expand addiction training for healthcare professionals,
- 3) expanding access to services in the criminal justice system,
- 4) investing in harm reduction approaches like community-based naloxone distribution (the overdose reversal drug) and syringe service programs

While certain policy actions should be taken up by the administration, other reforms may require additional research and policy development work to refine. Philanthropic donors can advance the critical knowledge base needed to create evidence-based SUD policy by investing in think tanks and research groups that already have relevant expertise, for example:

- [Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health](#) is a graduate school where students and staff research SUD and harm reduction services and systems of care, as well as policies relevant to drug control and substance use disorder treatments.
- [RAND](#) conducts drug policy research that addresses a range of concerns from treatment effectiveness to evaluations of programs that prevent youth SUDs.
- [RTI](#) is an independent, nonprofit research institute that develops quality measures (pharmacotherapy) aimed at helping providers, payers, and health systems work together to improve the quality of addiction treatment.
- [Urban Institute](#) carries out economic and social policy research on the prevalence of SUDs and assesses interventions for unhealthy addiction practices.

Funders can work with field leaders with expertise in these areas to identify and develop policy-relevant research projects that are both aligned with donor interests and well-positioned to advance SUD policy.

Advocacy by SUD patient-centered groups:

Much of the advocacy in the SUD space is led by groups that represent specific providers or industries. While many policies advanced by these groups would, in fact, have lifesaving implications, philanthropy is needed to ensure that the patient and family perspective is front-and-center in policy decisions. A number of national groups have a track record of securing policy wins at the federal and state level by advocating directly on behalf of the SUD patients and families they serve, including:

- [Drug Policy Alliance](#) ensures on-demand access to effective and affordable SUD treatment based on science, human rights, and compassion for those who have a SUD.
- [Legal Action Center](#) provides legal and other support services to individuals experiencing discrimination due to SUD, including women at risk of losing their children.
- [National Harm Reduction Coalition](#) aims to eliminate the existing disparities that people who use drugs face when it comes to accessing healthcare or basic human services by engaging in constructive conversations with communities, legislators, and public health organizations.
- [Shatterproof](#) advocates for early detection and effective treatment coverage of SUD.

Philanthropic investment in these groups would go a long way in securing systemic changes to increase access to quality care and decrease stigma.

Direct supports for SUD service providers and patients:

Many of the national nonprofits listed above also provide direct supports for service providers and SUD patients in the form of technical assistance, quality treatment locators, legal services, and guidance on safer drug use. For instance, syringe service programs reduce the event of an overdose significantly, while increasing a person's likelihood of accessing treatment. Funding for local direct service providers is particularly critical—these groups are most likely to reach at-risk individuals disenfranchised from mainstream health care services, but they lack access to public funding streams. Donors can find their local syringe service provider at the North American Syringe Exchange Network's [online directory](#), and they can find other local harm reduction supports at the National Harm Reduction Coalition's [online resource center](#). Philanthropic resources can help these experienced, effective organizations to expand services, serving as a direct investment in the health and well-being of people affected by SUDs and their providers. Examples of opportunities that donors can support include:

- [The National Health Law Program](#) fights to protect and expand health rights of low-income individuals, families and underserved communities.
- [Partnership to End Addiction](#) focuses on “helping the helpers,” providing personalized support for families, while also offering resources to providers, researchers, policymakers, schools, and other organizations, to establish a national, community-based response to supporting people with SUDs.
- [North American Syringe Exchange Network](#) encourages the expansion of a network of organizations and individuals that advocate for syringe exchange across North America with harm-reduction supplies, consulting, and more.

Outdated policies rooted in stigma, not science, have held us back from treating substance use disorder like the health condition it is. Philanthropic support and engagement is critically needed to accelerate the transformation of our SUD policy infrastructure, serve as an important source of capital to implement science-backed solutions, and ultimately, save lives.

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