May Newsletter

Welcome to the newest version of DPA’s newsletter. Instead of our previous monthly format, you’ll now receive our newsletter quarterly. We’ll provide more in-depth coverage of our progress and wins around the country, and give you more detailed updates about the most important drug policy issues that we’re facing today.

DecrimPovertyDC, Our Campaign to Decriminalize Drug Use in Washington, D.C., Launches

DPA is leading a campaign, DecrimPovertyDC, in partnership with HIPS, one of the city’s leading harm reduction service providers. We aim to decriminalize the possession of all drugs, provide for expungement and resentencing of past drug possession arrests and convictions, and establish 24/7 harm reduction centers – including overdose prevention programs – where people who use drugs can access support services.

The criminalization of drug possession is currently devastating the capital. It is saddling thousands of people with criminal records, trapping them in poverty, and creating barriers to employment, housing, financial aid, and other social supports. It is also fueling the overdose crisis – more than 500 died of a fatal overdose, over double the homicide rate. This crisis has been particularly acute among Black Washingtonians, with Black people representing 84% of all D.C. opioid overdose deaths in the past five years.

We are demanding a bold transformation of the city’s systems – to stop criminalizing people and offer support to those who need and want it.

The good news is that the public is overwhelmingly on our side. Recent polling shows that 83% of D.C. voters support eliminating criminal penalties for drug use and expanding treatment, health, and housing services. We now urgently need legislative support so that we can create these new ways to support and heal our communities. We are preparing to get our bill introduced in the D.C. Council in the fall.

Learn more
New CDC Data Shows Over 107,000 Overdose Deaths in 2021

New CDC data shows that there were over 107,000 overdose deaths in the U.S. last year, a 15% increase from 2020.

The provisional data indicates that overdose deaths increased in all but two states, with staggering rises in several parts of the country – including an annual increase in deaths of over 75% in Alaska, 42% in Kansas, and 35% in South Dakota.

“Once again, we are devastated by these numbers. Over 107,000 of our friends, family, and neighbors lost their lives to drug overdose last year. And sadly, we know the numbers will only continue to climb unless our policymakers actually do what is necessary to curb them,” said Jules Netherland, PhD, managing director of DPA’s Department of Research and Academic Engagement.

“The evidence shows us, that in order to actually make a difference, we have to replace these approaches with those centered in public health, such as drug decriminalization coupled with increased access to evidence-based treatment, harm reduction services, and overdose prevention centers.”

Overdose prevention centers (OPCs) are safe spaces where people can use drugs with trained peers and staff on hand to provide services, including the overdose reversal medication naloxone, if needed. In December, following years of advocacy by DPA, VOCAL-NY, and other harm reductionists with radical visions, New York City opened the nation’s first OPCs. More than 270 overdoses have been reversed in just the first five months of the city’s OPC operations.

While the Biden Administration has purportedly embraced harm reduction as part of its National Drug Control Strategy, it recently passed the federal Omnibus appropriations package – which included ineffective, punitive policies banning federal funding for syringes, falling short on adequate funding for harm reduction services, and extending harsh criminal penalties that criminalize communities. The administration continues to oppose the use of OPCs.

Learn more.

DPA’s Fight for Marijuana Justice Across the Country
DPA has made exciting progress on marijuana reform at the state and federal levels over the past few months.

At the federal level, the House of Representatives passed the Marijuana Opportunity Reinvestment and Expungement (MORE) Act in April. It is the first bill that would completely deschedule marijuana from the Controlled Substances Act, address the lifelong consequences of marijuana criminalization, reinvest in communities that have borne the brunt of prohibition, and take steps to ensure an equitable and diverse marketplace. It was passed with a bipartisan 220-204 majority. DPA has worked tirelessly to move the MORE Act forward since its inception.

“Now, it’s up to the Senate to finish the job,” said Maritza Perez, director of DPA’s Office of National Affairs. “It must begin to deliver on long overdue justice to end the status quo of racist and counterproductive enforcement. With more than two-thirds of Americans in favor of reform, it should be a swift and easy choice.”

In New York, where marijuana sales will begin by the end of this year, residents with marijuana convictions will be the first to get retail licenses, Governor Kathy Hochul has announced. Chris Alexander, the executive director of the state’s Office of Cannabis Management and a former DPA staffer, said that by focusing early on “those who otherwise would have been left behind,” New York was in a “position to do something that has not been done before.” This is a crucial and unprecedented step in the fight for marijuana justice. As DPA’s executive director, Kassandra Frederique, told the New York Times: “If you were the first to get hurt, you should be the first to benefit.”

In Mississippi in January, the state legislature provided long overdue justice for patients by voting to legalize medical marijuana. Back in 2020, following years of advocacy by DPA and our partners, Mississippians passed a similar initiative with 74% of the vote, but the ballot measure was overturned by the state’s Supreme Court due to a technicality. Our allies resolutely kept up the fight for justice following the court’s ruling, leading to the belated victory this year. We are emboldened by such progress taking place in the South – which has suffered under some of the most repressive drug policies in the country.

In April, the legal sale of marijuana began in New Mexico and New Jersey. For years, DPA has been on the forefront working to end marijuana prohibition in New Mexico and create a new, well-regulated, and inclusive marijuana industry that is rooted in racial and economic justice. As of April 1, New Mexican adults aged 21 and over can now buy up to two ounces of cannabis flower. In New Jersey, where DPA had worked with partners towards marijuana legalization for nearly two
decades, the legal sale of marijuana began on April 21. Adults aged 21 and over can now purchase up to one ounce of cannabis flower.

Learn more about DPA’s fight for marijuana justice.

DPA Clips, Podcasts, and Stories

FEATURED POST: MARIJUANA JUSTICE BROWNIES

Check out our brownie recipe. We call our version #MarijuanaJusticeBrownies. You haven’t seen this recipe anywhere else. Watch the video to find out why.

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DPA Hosts Drug War Dragnet, a Conference on Surveillance, Criminalization, and Freedom from Drug War Targeting

In April, DPA hosted Drug War Dragnet: Surveillance, Criminalization &
**Freedom from the Drug War.** The event was co-sponsored by the Network to Advance Abolitionist Social Work and Upturn.

This first-of-its-kind conference brought together leading thinkers to map the less seen forms of drug war surveillance within civil systems, such as public benefits, family policing, housing, immigration, employment, healthcare, and education.

The conference was inaugurated with a keynote – exploring the mounting threat posed by drug war surveillance in people's everyday lives – featuring acclaimed scholar and sociologist, Dorothy Roberts; political scientist and author, Virginia Eubanks; and DPA's executive director, Kassandra Frederique. [Watch the keynote here.](#)

The impacts of the drug war go far beyond arrest and incarceration in the criminal legal system. For decades, punitive drug war policies – driven by racism and bias – have infiltrated all aspects of our daily life, corrupting the civil systems that are allegedly meant to protect or uplift us.

Drug war surveillance is harming us by erecting barriers to success of individuals, families, and entire communities, while brazenly violating civil liberties. Employees are fired or blocked from jobs because of drug tests, tenants are evicted from their homes for suspected drug use, people are barred from public benefits because of drug involvement, parents are losing custody of their children for suspected drug use, and students are expelled for drug use. Communities of color and people who are cash-poor disproportionately bear the brunt of this surveillance, despite similar rates of drug use.

[Watch more recordings from the conference here.](#)

**DPA's Podcast, Drugs & Stuff: Classwide Scheduling of Fentanyl-Related Substances Won’t Save Lives - It Will Overcriminalize Them**

For the latest episode of DPA's podcast, Drugs & Stuff, criminal defense attorney Patricia Richman – an expert on fentanyl-related substances – joined Maritza Perez, director of our Office of National Affairs, to discuss classwide scheduling and why we are fighting against it.
Under the Controlled Substances Act, drugs are classified into legal, regulatory categories by the Drug Enforcement Administration. This is known as “drug scheduling”, and it’s generally guided by a drug’s potential for problematic use, and its medical value – and then the idea of classwide scheduling came along.

In 2018, in a misaligned approach to addressing the overdose crisis, President Trump used classwide scheduling to classify all fentanyl-related substances as Schedule I controlled substances. This means that any substance that was structurally similar enough to fentanyl became subject to harsh criminal penalties, regardless of its effects on the body.

President Biden, despite apologizing for his tough-on-crime past and promising real criminal justice reform, is advocating to make this Trump-era decision permanent, and it's now up to Congress to decide.

Listen now on our website or on your favorite podcast streaming platforms. The podcast's full back catalog can be found here.

**In Case You Missed It: DPA’s 2021 Annual Report**

At DPA, we had a big year in 2021, showing once again that our dreams are as achievable as they are urgent.

We shrunk the reach of the criminal legal system and promoted the wellbeing and rights of people who use drugs. We legalized marijuana for justice. We worked to uproot the drug war from all aspects of our lives. The sum of our efforts are the people whose lives have been saved or improved by the policies we changed.

Together, we are building the world we need.

See how DPA is building the bridge in our 2021 Annual Report.

**Drug Policy in the News**

*Filter:* One Year on, Oregon Drug Decriminalization Is Boosting Harm Reduction and Housing

*New York Times:* New Yorkers with Marijuana Convictions Will Get First Retail
Licenses

**HBO**: Harm Reduction: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver

**Marijuana Moment**: Austin, Texas Voters Approve Local Marijuana Decriminalization Ballot Initiative

**Vice**: Drug Users Are Writing ‘Do Not Prosecute’ Letters So Their Dealers Aren’t Punished If They Die

**ABC News**: Why Opioid Overdose Prevention Programs Work As NYC Leads Nation With 1st Center

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