

THE SAFER SUPPLY TOOLKIT

DRUG
POLICY
ALLIANCE.



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The urgency of such a project cannot be understated.

Sadly, since hosting our community conversations with over 50 drug user activists just a few years ago, we already lost several of them – to overdose and other health issues.

These losses are immeasurable to our national movement, but also to their local communities that so desperately needed their leadership and vision.

We are deeply devastated by the loss of these incredible people who had so much passion, so much potential, and so much to offer to help us to create the world we envision where a safe supply is possible and people who use drugs can get the resources they need.

We must honor their lives with this project which could save the lives of countless more.

HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT

The Safer Supply Toolkit is a guide that seeks to support advocates in advancing the public conversation on safer supply and all-drug legal regulation.

It is the culmination of a collaborative exploration of safer supply as a replacement to prohibition by the Drug Policy Alliance, the Pan-American Network of Drug User Activists, the New England Users Union, the National Survivors Union (formerly the Urban Survivors Union), and the Michigan Users Union.

IT IS COMPOSED OF FOUR PARTS:

- 1) an executive summary,**
- 2) a key strategies document and resource list,**
- 3) a media guide, and**
- 4) discussion guides for communities and healthcare professionals**

The executive summary synthesizes the most important principles of safer supply from the perspectives of people who use drugs and allied advocates. These principles emerged from a series of Community Conversations held in collaboration with drug user unions across the United States. While participants differed on how to implement safer supply, all agreed that safer supply is essential to address the overdose crisis and repair the harms of the drug war. Safer supply builds upon the existing work of drug policy advocates to legally regulate marijuana and decriminalize personal drug possession. Despite political backlash stemming from deeply ingrained prohibition ideology, these policies remain largely popular among the general public. Therefore, the present moment is an important opportunity to broaden the horizons of what is considered possible.

The key strategies document outlines four specific actions that advocates can take to advance conversations about safer supply in their local communities. This includes connecting with directly impacted individuals and healthcare providers to discuss their needs and ideas for safer supply. Advocates can also educate the public on the benefits of a regulated drug supply and engage with

the media to push for policy change and challenge misconceptions regarding safer supply, including perceived threats to public safety and order.

The media guide equips advocates with essential tools to further discussions on safer supply and legal regulation on a broader scale. It includes evidence-based talking points as well as tips for crafting effective op-eds, cultivating relationships with journalists, and creating compelling calls to action. Through targeted messaging and meaningful relationship-building, individuals and organizations can play a vital role in advocating for policies that prioritize public health, harm reduction, and social justice.

Lastly, **the Safer Supply & Legal Regulation: What Comes Next? discussion guide** is modeled off the original Community Conversations. There are two versions of the guide, each tailored to support community organizations and healthcare providers in developing policy proposals that center the autonomy and well-being of people who use drugs. Discussion participants are prompted to consider four key questions of legal regulation from a consumer standpoint:

Who should have access to a safer supply of drugs?

Where should a person be able to access it?

How much can they access?

And where can they use?

The answers to these questions — and how they're used — are up to you:

what is your vision for safer supply?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"We are past an emergency. An emergency was yesterday. Today, we are in a global catastrophe. We know that mobilization can happen: we saw how cities and countries mobilized when it came to COVID-19. The reason why it's not happening now is because we're dealing with a population that is deemed un-human. Safe supply restores our humanity. **Safe supply gives us a choice."**

- Drug User Union Representative

Since 2000, over one million people in the United States have died from drug overdose.

The underground drug market is illegal and unregulated, leading consumers to buy drugs of unknown quality and potency. This can increase the risk of overdose and adverse effects because it is difficult to stay safe. People who use drugs also face anti-drug stigma that makes it hard to seek help and it keeps people in the shadows. Arrest for drug possession can lead to a criminal record that [limits job opportunities and access to housing and social services](#).

After decades of harsh drug laws and enforcement, our drug supply has gotten more dangerous. We know that harm reduction, drug checking, and evidence-based treatments can help reduce the risk of overdose. But they cannot fix the underground drug supply. The only way to address the drug supply is through legal regulation and a safer supply.

The Drug Policy Alliance hosted Community Conversations with people who use drugs across the United States in 2021. The aim was to learn about safer supply preferences among people who use drugs in the US. The Community Conversations were co-hosted by the Pan-American Network of Drug User Activists, the New England Users Union, the National Survivors Union (formerly called the Urban Survivors Union), and the Michigan Users Union. Attendees explored different policy frameworks and discussed the pros and cons of different approaches.

The Safer Supply Toolkit was developed based on these Community Conversations. It aims to help engage people who use drugs, healthcare providers, and the public in conversations about safer supply. The Toolkit also includes a strategy guide, a reading list, safer supply discussion guides for communities and healthcare providers, and a media guide. This document summarizes the most important principles from the Community Conversations.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Canadian government allowed healthcare providers to prescribe a safer supply to their patients. According to the Canadian Association of People who Use Drugs, safer supply is "a legal and regulated supply of drugs with mind/body altering properties that traditionally have been accessible only through the illicit drug market:"

In one model of [safer supply program](#), healthcare providers prescribe pharmaceutical alternatives to illicit drugs in medical settings. But there are also less medical models. The Drug User Liberation Front implemented the [compassion club model](#) as a more community-driven approach. There are also many other possibilities for safer supply.

People who use drugs have different ideas on how to enact safer supply. But they all can agree that access to a safer supply of drugs will save lives.

There were five key takeaways from our conversations with people who use drugs.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Safer supply is a needed emergency response to the overdose crisis. Safer supply offers access to a known dose of a known substance without dangerous adulterants. It is the only way that people who use drugs can make informed decisions about their drug use and take steps to stay safe.

“Dealers don’t have any control over the supply they’re giving me. People who love me sold me stuff that almost killed me.”

The United States is experiencing an unprecedented overdose crisis. And most lives were lost due to an unregulated drug supply. As we funded more law enforcement and interdiction, it only made the drug supply more unpredictable. Drug supply chains were disrupted. More adulterants were added. And people who use drugs were not prepared for these changes. Safer supply will allow people to know what they are consuming. To have the most impact, safer supply programs must also be able to offer users an affordable, attractive, and practical alternative to the underground drug supply to save lives.

A safer supply, when combined with other harm reduction interventions, can keep our communities safe.

“Harm reduction saved my life, but safe supply would have given me a life.”

Overdose prevention centers (OPCs) and syringe service programs are essential. These programs reduce overdose and disease risk. They also provide sterile equipment, naloxone, drug checking, and harm reduction education. However, such strategies can only do so much to keep people safe; because they cannot fix the drug supply. Safer supply is a necessary component of a holistic harm reduction approach because it provides consumers with precise information about what they are consuming.

Safer supply must be available through community-based programs to reach people - especially people who have been excluded from or harmed by medical settings.

“The stigmatization of people who use drugs in medical facilities is visible, palpable, and killing us.”

People who use drugs report negative experiences with healthcare providers. And many avoid medical care because of mistreatment. Many people who use drugs worry about overly medical models of safer supply in the US. This is because there are so many racial and class disparities in the types and quality of treatment that are provided in our healthcare system. For example, [research shows](#) Black people are less likely to be prescribed buprenorphine, a medication for opioid use disorder, compared to white people. This is why safer supply must also be available through community models outside of healthcare. Cooperative models can build upon existing peer networks to best serve marginalized people and meet them where they’re at. Cooperative models could be non-profits, avoiding profit motives and commercialization that cause harm. At the same time, healthcare providers must work to rebuild trust with patients who use drugs. Many people want better relationships with their doctors. But our current systems of care are ill-equipped to meet their complex needs.

“If we could get good doctors with good training who don’t stigmatize people who use drugs, we could get expert input on our wellness around substance use. I would love that and need it in my life so much.”

People who use drugs prefer nonprofit and cooperative models of legal regulation. They prefer models that use existing peer networks, maximize access, and keep resources within communities most harmed by the drug war.

“We have to work through existing networks and community connections, rather than make people jump through hoops to get their supply.”

People who use drugs envision themselves as active participants in safer supply models. Legal regulation can shift power and resources to communities of people who already trust and care about each other. Cooperatives work for communities instead of profits. Services can be easily adapted to meet a wide range of needs. Community-based drug manufacturers and distributors are best suited to provide safe supply access to otherwise hard-to-reach populations.

Evidence-based education on drug use is necessary to improve public health and rally support for safer supply.

“I think there needs to be education associated with access, and everyone should be able to access that information. Ideally, people would be getting age-appropriate education on drugs throughout their lives.”

Lack of knowledge is dangerous. Educating people about drugs empowers them to make informed choices about whether or not to use drugs. It is important to get accurate information about drug effects, side effects, and potential risks. Armed with education, people can keep themselves and their communities safe. Education is also necessary to win public support for safer supply and raise awareness about the real reasons overdose deaths are so high. Education can also help to reduce stigma toward people who use drugs. Hard-won drug policy reforms and harm reduction policies are facing significant political backlash. Education can help people to see why these reforms are essential and life-saving.

The Safer Supply Toolkit is one such effort to educate the public. We need to ensure that current and future advocates have the tools to discuss safer supply with their communities. It is the only way that we can build the world we envision.

Safer supply is a needed emergency response to the overdose crisis.

Safer supply offers access to a known dose of a known substance without dangerous adulterants, so people who use drugs can make informed decisions about their drug use and take appropriate precautions to stay safe.

KEY STRATEGIES FOR ADVANCING SAFER SUPPLY

As fatal overdoses remain alarmingly high; the harms of the drug war are impossible to ignore. People who use drugs risk overdose and other adverse effects because they must rely on an unpredictable drug market. Harm reduction programs provide essential resources to people who use drugs, but can only do so much when the drug supply itself is the problem. The only solution is the legal regulation of drugs, or providing a safer supply. With a safer supply, consumers know about the quality, potency, and purity of the drugs they purchase. Safer supply is a necessary component of a holistic harm reduction approach.

This document highlights key strategies to advance safer supply. It is based on the principles of safer supply and legal regulation, outlined in the Executive Summary of the Safer Supply Toolkit. This document provides advocates with a framework to expand conversations on safer supply. The Toolkit also includes a safer supply discussion guide for communities and healthcare providers and a media guide. The media guide has tips and talking points for working with media. This Toolkit was developed by the Drug Policy Alliance in collaboration with the Pan-American Network of Drug User Activists, the New England Users Union, the National Survivors Union (formerly the Urban Survivors Union), and the Michigan Users Union.

1. BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH COMMUNITY LEADERS FROM DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS

Each community faces different challenges in implementing harm reduction services. Each community also has diverse stakeholders and potential allies. Get familiar with harm reduction services and other major community organizations in your area. Who are the key players? Engage with directly impacted people from the beginning for their guidance and support when developing strategies to promote safer supply. Understand your community's immediate and long-term needs by talking with people who access services for people who use drugs. Seek input from folks whose experiences differ from your own. Keep the perspectives of racially and ethnically marginalized people at the forefront of the conversation.

2. INVITE HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS TO THE DISCUSSION TABLE

Doctors, nurses, psychiatrists, and other providers must learn about harm reduction to save lives. Local harm reduction organizations likely have existing relationships with sympathetic medical professionals. It is important to engage healthcare providers in discussions about safer supply because they can be powerful allies. Many are unaware of safer supply models, especially medical safer supply models. They may be more open to safer supply when learning that other healthcare providers support the approach. They also may find the research persuasive. Introduce the concept of safer supply at conferences, seminars, and lectures. If you are a provider, start conversations with your colleagues. And use our healthcare provider discussion guide!

3. EDUCATE AND ENGAGE THE PUBLIC

Most people do not understand how the drug war has created the unpredictable and potent drug supply. And many simply believe we must focus on drug prevention and treatment to save lives. It is important to meet people where they're at. Explain how no regulation means no quality control. Explain that there are models of safer supply saving lives around the world right now. Engaging the broader public on safer supply will set the stage for revolutionary policy change that will end the drug war for all. There are many ways to do this. It can be as simple as posting about harm reduction and safer supply on social media. Talking with your friends, family, and fellow community members makes an impact too. Our media guide will help you draft an op-ed or letter to the editor. Our discussion guide could help you talk to your user union or colleagues. You could also host a webinar, organize a town hall... the sky's the limit!

4. PREPARE TO RESPOND TO MEDIA INQUIRIES

As the overdose crisis rages on, more people are interested in thinking outside of the box. Journalists are increasingly interested in discussing harm reduction and other innovative approaches. Journalists often seek new experts to get information and analysis. You may be invited to write an op-ed. It is crucial for drug policy advocates to build meaningful relationships with journalists. It can help us to keep raising awareness about safer supply as a needed response to the overdose crisis. Pay attention to the outlets that are talking about drug policy and harm reduction. Connect with the reporters who cover these issues. Reach out and make yourself available.

Check out the [Safer Supply Toolkit Media Guide](#) to learn valuable tips on working with the media and getting your message out there.

DISCUSSION PARTICIPANT WORKSHEET

Welcome and thank you for participating in our Community Conversations on safer supply and legal regulation! Please use this worksheet to draft your ideal scenario for regulating different types of currently illicit drugs in your community. You can use one model for all drugs or multiple models for specific drugs.

Circle, cross out, or fill in your own criteria to create the pathway(s) you would want to use in order to legally access various mind- and body-altering substances.

IF YOU LEGALIZED DRUGS TOMORROW: WHO CAN ACCESS?	YES	NO
People should only be allowed access to this drug by prescription.		
If yes, by prescription only - Who can get a prescription?		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People with dependence or substance use disorder who have not had success with medications or treatment before 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People with dependence or substance use disorder only 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Any adult</u> can get a prescription, <u>except if</u> incarcerated or pregnant 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Any adult</u> can get a prescription, <u>even if</u> incarcerated or pregnant, but no minors 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any adult <u>but only minors with dependence or substance use disorder</u> 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other prescribed group _____ 		

	YES	NO
People should only be allowed access if they register or get a special license.		
If yes, registered or licensed users only - Who can register or get licensed?		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People with dependence or substance use disorder who have not had success with medications or treatment before 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People with dependence or substance use disorder only 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Any adult</u> can get a prescription, <u>except if</u> incarcerated or pregnant 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Any adult</u> can get a prescription, <u>even if</u> incarcerated or pregnant, but no minors 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any adult <u>but only minors with dependence or substance use disorder</u> 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other prescribed group _____ 		
People should not need a prescription, license or registration.		

Other thoughts about who should be able to access drugs?

**IF YOU LEGALIZED DRUGS TOMORROW:
WHERE CAN ONE GET DRUGS?**

YES

NO

People should only be allowed to get their drugs in medical settings.

If yes, in medical settings only - **Which medical settings?**

- People should only get their drugs in specialized clinics
- People should be able to get their drugs in their general healthcare clinics
- People should go to specialized pharmacies
- People should be able to get them in any pharmacies by prescription
- People should be able to get them in pharmacies over-the-counter
- Other medical setting _____

People should only be allowed to get their drugs in licensed specialized venues.

If yes, in licensed specialized venues - **Which licensed specialized venues?**

- People should only get their drugs in government-run dispensaries
- People should only get their drugs from non-profit cooperatives
- People should only get their drugs from for-profit dispensaries
- Other licensed specialized venue _____

	YES	NO
People should only be allowed to get their drugs in licensed general venues		
If yes, in licensed general venues - Which licensed general venues?		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● People should only be able to get their drugs in private venues (e.g. bars, clubs, coffee shops) 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● People should only be able to get their drugs in private retail (e.g. liquor store) 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Other prescribed group _____ 		
People should only be allowed to get their drugs in unlicensed venues		
If yes, in licensed general venues - Which licensed general venues?		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Grocery stores 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Farmer's markets 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Other unlicensed venue _____ 		
People should be allowed to get their drugs mailed or delivered to them.		

Other thoughts about where one should be able to get their drugs?

IF YOU LEGALIZED DRUGS TOMORROW: WHERE CAN ONE LEGALLY USE OR CONSUME THEIR DRUGS?	YES	NO
People should only be allowed to use/consume drugs in private spaces.		
If yes, only in private spaces - Which private spaces?		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● People can only use/consume in medical or health clinics 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● People can only use/consume in designated indoor spaces (e.g. supervised consumption sites) 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● People can only use/consume in private venues (e.g. bars, clubs, coffee shops) 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● People can only use at home, private residences, or private property 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Other private spaces _____ 		
People should only be allowed to use/consume drugs in private spaces.		
If yes, only in private spaces - Which private spaces?		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● People can only use/consume in designated outdoor spaces (e.g. smoking areas) 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● People can use/consume in all outdoor areas, excl. certain areas (e.g. public parks, but not near playgrounds) 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Everywhere 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Other private spaces _____ 		

Other thoughts about where people should be allowed to use/consume drugs?

IF YOU LEGALIZED DRUGS TOMORROW: HOW MUCH CAN ONE ACQUIRE AT A TIME?	YES	NO
There should be limits upon how much of a drug one can acquire.		
If yes, there should be limits - What types of limits should there be?		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● There should be a standard limit (<i>by weight or measurement</i>) to how much of a drug allowed in a purchase. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● People should only be allowed to get enough to manage their withdrawal. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● People should only be allowed to get enough for their own personal use; not sharing. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Other limits _____ 		
There should be NO limits upon how much of a drug one can acquire.		

Other thoughts about how much one can acquire at a time?

MEDIA GUIDE

Amidst alarmingly high fatal overdoses, we must explore alternatives to drug prohibition. Safer supply is a potential solution that centers social justice and public health. The Drug Policy Alliance and Drug Users Union Safer Supply Toolkit is a resource for advocates to advance the conversation on safer supply. This media guide includes evidence-based messaging that addresses common questions and concerns. The guide also offers tips for crafting effective op-eds, cultivating relationships with journalists, and creating compelling calls to action. Through thoughtful advocacy, you can play a vital role in enacting the future of drug policy.

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

Research the publication and journalist before you agree to an interview.

Has a publication or journalist covered drugs or harm reduction before? Ask colleagues who have worked with them before about their experience. Would they recommend that you do the interview?

- Positive past coverage indicates a publication or journalist might be more sympathetic. They may be more open to your message and perspective. Even so, it is still important to stick to the messages outlined below. A reporter may be missing key information you can provide with this toolkit.
- A lack of coverage might imply limited knowledge on drug policy. You can use this toolkit to give them essential information on safer supply and harm reduction.
- Past negative coverage may or may not signal bad intentions. A journalist may be interviewing you to learn more and get an alternative perspective. But there is a chance they may try to use your words to paint harm reduction in a negative light. If you are worried about this, it is okay to turn down the interview. However, this toolkit can help you stay on message if you decide to move forward.

Know the difference between "on background" vs. "on-the-record."

A background interview means any information you provide won't be attributed to you. An "on-the-record" interview means that anything you say can be quoted in the final article. Make sure you are clear about the purpose of an interview with any journalist. Never assume anything is off-the-record.

Build relationships with reporters so you can be a resource to them for future articles.

If you have a positive experience, this reporter may reach out for your perspective in a future story. They also may be open for you to contact them with ideas for stories!

Make yourself available and be prepared for interviews.

Time is of the essence when it comes to the media. Sometimes, a journalist will contact you with a deadline of a few hours. It is important to reply quickly and be flexible so you can increase your chances of getting quoted in the final piece. If you are not available, let them know and encourage them to contact you again in the future. If possible, recommend a trusted alternative source.

SPECIFIC TIPS AND ADVICE FOR BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER AN INTERVIEW

Establish your key principles, core messages, and talking points before talking with members of the media.

Keep this guide on hand and skim it before your call! Refresh your memory before every call so you do not forget any key points.

Tailor your message to specific audiences and media outlets.

Based on your research, would this publication or journalist be more interested in a conversation or a debate?

You can ask them to send their questions in advance.

Sometimes they are willing to send questions in advance and it can help you prepare and make sure you stay on message.

You can ask them to repeat the question.

And if you do not understand, ask them to clarify or rephrase their question.

You do not have to answer any question that you do not want to answer.

And if you feel like your words may be misconstrued, you can ask to stop the interview or say you want to move to the next question. You can also just redirect the conversation to stay on message.

Stay on point and message.

Be as brief as possible. This reduces the risk of a misunderstanding or getting quoted incorrectly in the article. Often journalists do not have a lot of time, so it helps to be brief and answer the questions they ask.

Tie your messaging to current events and offer a new angle to drug or harm reduction stories.

While we should talk about safer supply every day, it is particularly important to talk about it whenever new overdose data are released. Connect safer supply to other drug and harm reduction news events during your interview.

Issue a call to action.

Tell them what our lawmakers need to change about our approach and how we must focus on saving lives first. Emphasize the urgency and significance of your message.

After the interview, thank them for the opportunity and offer to speak to them in the future.

If you like the final article, send them a message telling them they did a good job! Positive reinforcement means they may come back to you in the future!

CORE MESSAGING

What is decriminalization?

- Decriminalization removes criminal penalties for drug possession. Instead, possession is treated as a civil offense, like a speeding or parking ticket. You will not be arrested if you possess decriminalized drugs, but the officer may take your drugs or dispose of them.
- Decriminalization doesn't allow or regulate the sale or manufacture of drugs, so people continue to buy drugs on the underground market. This means that drugs may be adulterated and of unknown potency and quality.
- Decriminalization usually applies to a set amount of drugs— usually a few grams — and it varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction.
- The state of Oregon temporarily decriminalized the personal possession of small amounts of drugs from February 2021 until August 31, 2024 and drug arrests decreased across the state.
- Drug decriminalization reduces drug arrests, but it may not have a direct impact on drug overdoses because the drug supply is still unregulated and unpredictable.

What is safer supply?

- Safer supply creates a medical-grade drug supply available from licensed sellers. Within the regulated market, the use, sale, and manufacturing of drugs are allowed. When safer supply is legally available, people who use these drugs are not criminalized or arrested for possession.
- Safer supply offers informed access to a known dose of a drug. The underground drug market cannot guarantee potency or purity. This leaves drug users vulnerable to unnecessary risk.
- Under legal regulation, drugs would be subject to rigorous quality control. This ensures their potency and purity so people never have to guess what's in their drugs.
 - Sometimes, a safer supply is created without full regulation. In some states, access to drug checking technology has allowed people to bring their pre-obtained drugs to a harm reduction program where a small sample can be tested for adulterants. This way, people can know exactly what they're using. However, this often happens at a very small scale and it is not available in all communities.

However, this often happens at a very small scale it is not available in all communities because it is not legal, accessible, and/or funded everywhere.

- The United States currently regulates alcohol, tobacco, and pharmaceuticals. In some states, marijuana is regulated as well. Under law, people can buy these substances without fear of contamination or criminalization.

Why safer supply?

- Safer supply saves lives. We all want our loved ones alive. Right now, we're dealing with an unregulated drug supply that is fueling the overdose crisis. People who use drugs from the underground market have no guarantee of what's in their drugs. Safer supply would reduce the risk of overdose by guaranteeing potency and purity.
 - Drug checking services help people make safer choices. Fentanyl test strips provide quick information on whether a drug contains fentanyl. Xylazine test strips test for the presence of xylazine. Advanced chemical testing, such as FTIR and mass spectrometry, provides a full view of a drug's contents. [The popularity of drug checking services shows that people want to know what's in their drugs.](#) However, drug checking is not legal in every state.
- The drug war drives the unpredictable underground drug supply. In an unregulated market, there are no systems to safeguard against contaminants. There are no alerts to pull drugs out of circulation or warn consumers. Instead, the responsibility lies on consumers to find a reliable supply. Too often, they have no choice or few options.
 - Drug busts drive overdoses. [A recent study](#) found that drug seizures in Indianapolis were directly followed by a local spike in overdoses in the weeks following. This is because people lose their trusted dealers after drug busts and their tolerance for drugs goes down. When they find new dealers, they do not know the potency of the drugs they are buying and are at higher risk of overdose.
- Safer supply complements other harm reduction strategies. It is best to combine safer supply with harm reduction strategies to keep people as safe as possible. Consumers would receive safer use equipment and instructions on how to reduce risk. This would dramatically reduce the risk of injury, infection, and disease

What's wrong with how we do things now?

- Over one million people have died of drug overdose in the United States since the beginning of the overdose crisis. We have lost over 100,000 people to overdose every year since 2021. Our government has failed to meaningfully address the overdose crisis and save lives. Instead, another [1.1 million people](#) are arrested every year for drug offenses. The majority of charges are for simple possession and disproportionately impact marginalized people. Meanwhile, many more are denied access to necessary pain relief and medication for opioid use disorder.
- The criminalization of people who use drugs has disproportionately devastated generations of racially and economically marginalized people. Drug charges have been the main driver of mass incarceration and criminalization since the 1990s. Despite using and selling drugs at similar rates, Black people are charged for possession [twice as often](#) as white people. The gap is even greater for sales. We grieve not only for those we've lost to overdose but also for those we've lost to the punitive justice system.
- Our friends, family members, coworkers, partners, and other community members are dying. [Almost half](#) of all people in the United States know someone who has died from an overdose. The legal regulation of a safer supply of drugs is an emergency response to this catastrophe of mass death.
- The drug war has driven the adulteration of the illicit drug supply. Crackdowns lead illicit manufacturers to create stronger drugs that are easier to hide. Fentanyl, xylazine and nitazines were all introduced to avoid law enforcement.

What does safer supply look like in practice?

- The legal regulation of a safer supply of drugs can take many different forms. Clinics in Canada and Europe have provided medical-grade alternatives to illicit drugs for years. In some parts of the United States, alcohol sales are controlled by the state. These are two models of how safer supply can be implemented in practice. Any model must balance consumer protection and ease of access.
- Safer supply must be formed in collaboration with people who use drugs. Without their insight, policymakers may overlook barriers or fail to address past injustices.
- People use drugs for many reasons, so safer supply needs to be inclusive of any reason. It could be for pleasure, medicine, spirituality, pain management or something else.
- Safer supply is complementary to medications for opioid use disorder. Some people may want to reduce their opioid use while engaging in safer stimulant use. Safer supply empowers people to meet all of their substance use goals.
- A free-market approach to legal regulation can be dangerous too. Without key safeguards, safer supply will be vulnerable to corporate capture and for-profit interests at the expense of public health. The tobacco industry is one example of how profit-driven drug markets do more harm than good.
- Safer supply needs to be founded in racial and social equity. Nonprofit organizations, cooperatives and compassion clubs are all models for consumer-centered regulation. These models limit profit incentives and keep resources within the communities they serve. [Preliminary findings](#) suggest that participants who got their drugs from the Drug User Liberation Front, a compassion club in Vancouver, had a lower risk of overdose because they had a stable supply of drugs of known potency and purity.

How will safer supply and legal regulation address the harms of the war on drugs?

- Legal regulation must repair the generational devastation wrought by the war on drugs. Racially and economically marginalized people have borne the brunt of mass criminalization. Therefore, we must take proactive measures to center and uplift affected communities.
- This includes automatic record expungement for drug-related convictions. It also includes the reservation of business licenses for justice-involved individuals. Any tax revenue should be directed back into impacted communities.
- Our drug laws punish simple possession with a lifelong criminal record. National decriminalization of drug possession alone would keep [hundreds of thousands of people](#) out of the legal system. Regulation would go even further by integrating sellers into the legal market.
 - *People often sell drugs for survival or to sustain their own supply. We must work to create pathways for underground sellers to join the legal market. This way, both sellers and buyers stand to gain from a regulated supply.*
 - *Be prepared for questions about integrating underground markets. This is often brought up in conversations around legalized marijuana. Emphasize the ineffectiveness of punitive measures and restricted access to licensing. We must make it easier to get into the legalized market or else the underground market will remain strong.*
- Safer supply could reduce contact between law enforcement and marginalized people for drug possession charges. In states and countries that have decriminalized drug possession, arrests typically decrease because policing priorities shift away from low-level drug enforcement.
- Safer supply must address health inequity. People of color are already underrepresented in medical marijuana programs and clinical trials. The cost of ketamine treatment keeps it out of reach for most people. The process of getting and staying on methadone is difficult and humiliating. If left unaddressed, these injustices would continue with legal regulation. We must provide fair access to novel treatments and medication for opioid use disorder.
- Big businesses maximize profit; safer supply prioritizes public health. Advertising bans and labeling requirements are two ways of controlling profit motives and promoting safer use.

How will safer supply and legal regulation reduce drug trade violence?

- **Drug prohibition itself is a driver of violence.** Drug prohibition destabilizes the market by regularly removing key players. New, competing players move in to capture as much profit as possible. Groups left without leaders must then settle the resulting conflict and they may use violence to establish dominance. Legal regulation would create bureaucratic procedures of resolving business disputes and keeping people in the market.
- **Drug law enforcement forces people to act out of fear.** The threat of arrest or prosecution drives many people to turn against each other. Prosecutors often offer plea bargains in exchange for information on other sellers. This sets off a domino effect of arrests and retaliation for actual or alleged snitching.
- **Drug prohibition incentivizes illicit manufacturers to produce more potent drugs.** Drug traffickers seek to transport their supply without detection or confiscation. Fentanyl, xylazine, nitazenes, and other cutting agents extend a supply without compromising potency.

Alcohol and tobacco are legal, but many suffer from short- and long-term health consequences. How would safer supply prevent drug-related harms from happening with different drugs like heroin or cocaine?

- We can learn from past policy failures that put profit or punishment over public health. The history of drug laws in the United States provides endless examples of what does and doesn't work.
 - *The prohibition of alcohol was a disaster. Organized crime skyrocketed with the high demand for illicitly produced alcohol. Illicit alcohol was often contaminated, leading to poisoning, blindness, paralysis, and other harms. For 13 years, [around a thousand people](#) died annually due to tainted alcohol.*
 - *Cigarette use has plummeted among adults and youth since the 1990s. But this wasn't because we banned cigarettes. Instead, we engaged consumers in evidence-based health education. We regulated advertisements, packaging, and sales. We also raised taxes.*
- Harm reduction is a necessary component of safer supply. When we go to a bar, alcohol is prepared in front of us and served in a clean glass. When we buy alcohol from a store, it's clearly labeled with serving size and health information. These common-sense practices can be adapted to any drug and setting.
- Safer supply builds upon harm reduction services to reach more people. Overdose prevention centers and syringe service programs are important stopgaps. They serve the crucial purpose of saving lives and preventing the spread of disease. Safer supply would allow people to use in any setting without fear of adverse outcomes.
- Lack of knowledge is often as dangerous as an unregulated supply of drugs. People need fact-based, not fear-based, education on drugs. Education empowers people to make informed choices regardless of whether they ever use drugs. This means understanding drug effects, risks, safety measures, and signs of overdose.
- With legal regulation, we can focus production on less potent drugs. We can also develop formulations that pose fewer risks to consumers.

OxyContin was legally regulated and look where we ended up. How would safer supply be any different?

- Pharmaceutical companies misled us by aggressively marketing novel opioids as non-addictive. The fraudulent marketing of prescription opioids prioritized profit over people. Safer supply acknowledges and addresses addiction risks through education and harm reduction.
- The FDA failed to regulate pharmaceutical companies and protect consumers from harm. While this should give us pause, it should not deter us from pursuing better regulations that center public health when we regulate other drugs.
- Restrictions on regulated opioids exacerbated the overdose crisis. Opioid prescribers faced heavy scrutiny, and strict production quotas limited supply. These and other factors led many who relied on prescription opioids to seek illicit drugs instead.
 - *If you are asked about people diverting or selling their safe supply on the underground market, you can talk about how it is a rare occurrence and reframe the concept. [Research with safe supply participants](#) shows that when people share their safe supply, it is often for one of several reasons: safety, compassion, meeting needs, survival, or pressure.*

What can we do right now to advance safer supply and legal regulation?

- Right now, we are far away from seeing all-drug legal regulation become a reality on the federal level. Yet, we can look at the past and other nations' models to learn what's been done before.
- Evidence-based education on drug use is necessary to rally support for safer supply. We must dispel drug myths and equip people with the knowledge they need to keep themselves and their loved ones safe.
- Many progressive policies complement and make meaningful steps toward safer supply. Marijuana is now legal in [half of all](#) the United States. Personal drug possession was briefly decriminalized in Oregon. Despite its legislative rollback, this was a major win. We can continue this advocacy to include the legalization of psychedelic research and heroin-assisted treatment. In the meantime, we must also protect and expand harm reduction services as much as possible. These programs save lives while we fight for a better future.

Advocating for drug decriminalization opens up a conversation about safer supply. You can start the conversation through social media posts, talking with friends, writing op-eds, and building relationships with journalists.

The next section of the Safer Supply Toolkit aims to help you become media-savvy in your advocacy work.

TIPS FOR WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

Identifying your target audience

One of the first and most important steps of media engagement is knowing your audience. When you speak (or write), who do you want to hear your message? Are you seeking to change people's minds, or mobilize those who already support you? Is there a specific thing you want your audience to do? Answering these questions will help you prepare for any media appearance.

Potential audiences include:

- People in your local community
- Elected officials and other policymakers
- Clinicians (e.g., doctors, nurses, physician assistants, pharmacists)
- Mental health providers (e.g., psychologists, social workers, substance use counselors)
- Criminal legal actors (e.g., law enforcement, judges, attorneys, correctional officers)
- People who use drugs and their loved ones
- People in recovery from addiction or other problematic substance use

Choosing your target media outlets

Different people get their news from different sources. You must identify your target audience's preferred media outlets to best reach them.

As an example, older audiences tend to get their news from print media and cable news broadcasts. Younger audiences tend to prefer digital media and social networking platforms. Get to know people in your intended audience and ask where they learn about current events. Who do they trust and why do they trust them? Do they have specific columns or authors they follow?

After identifying your audience's preferred outlets, now it's time to research them.

You want to get a sense of an outlet's coverage on drug policy and related issues before reaching out.

Start with a general review of each outlet to get a feel for their priorities and political leanings.

For newspapers, glance over the front page and read the op-ed section. For websites, check out the most-read articles as well as opinion pieces. For television and radio broadcasts, watch or listen to their most popular shows. What topics do they focus on the most? Whose opinions are most represented? How are controversial issues addressed? This will offer insight into an outlet's approach to covering current events.

Next, dive deeper into each outlet's coverage of drug policy-related issues.

What topics have they addressed, and how have they addressed them (e.g. the overdose crisis, harm reduction, addiction)? Whose voices did they include? What were the key takeaways? If the outlet hasn't covered drug policy, have they covered similar issues? Mental health, poverty and criminal justice are all interwoven with drug policy advocacy. Don't assume a lack of coverage means a lack of interest. You could have the chance to shape an outlet's coverage by being the first to engage with them on these issues.

As a last step, find your way in.

Does the outlet invite outside contributions? If so, what kind (e.g., opinion pieces, letters to the editor, interviews)? How do you submit an opinion piece? How are interviewees chosen? Are there "beat" reporters who focus on the issues you care about? Some paths may be well-established, but others you'll have to make your own. Next, we'll talk about how to build relationships with journalists and become an expert source.

Building relationships with journalists and editors

Building relationships is one of the most important aspects of policy advocacy. Journalists and editors play major roles in shaping media coverage of our issues. While journalists write and research their stories, editors ultimately decide what gets published. Editors will sometimes assign journalists topics of personal and professional interest. So, both groups are helpful for you to target!

You've likely already come across journalists who regularly report on drug policy issues. Editors may have published supportive statements on harm reduction or medications for opioid use disorder. Take note of them as people to get to know more. Using some of the tips below, break the ice and establish yourself as an expert source on drug policy issues. Ideally, reporters will reach out to you to seek your insight when they are ready to write their next story.

- Follow them on social media and track their posts. What are they paying attention to? What are they writing about? How do their issues intersect with yours?
- Like and share their articles and posts when they do a good job of covering drug policy and related issues. Email, comment, or reply to let them know you appreciate their work. A well-thought-out message and a sincere compliment go a long way!
- Sometimes, sympathetic journalists can still get something wrong. When that happens, offer critical but friendly feedback that helps build your relationship. Thank them for covering an important issue as you offer more information.
- If your account is public, emphasize your work in harm reduction and drug policy in your bio. This will encourage journalists to follow you back and engage with your content as well.
- Send them an email and introduce yourself. Offer to set up a call and talk about your work, the overdose crisis, and how safer supply is a policy solution we need. Offer to be a source if they cover drug policy issues in the future. Let them know you can connect them to other experts in the field.
- Once you establish contact, keep them updated when a new issue comes up. Send them articles, flag new laws or bills, and keep them posted on drug policy issues. Just be mindful of how often

you are contacting them!

- If you work at a harm reduction program, consider inviting respectful journalists to visit. This would let them see what you do and learn about harm reduction firsthand. Be sure to get permission from and work closely with the organization. Prepare staff and participants before they arrive and make sure that people are comfortable with a journalist coming. Be sure to tell the journalist whether they have permission to take photographs or if you agree to being "on the record" during their visit.

Being an expert source and preparing for interviews

After connecting with some journalists, you may start being contacted to speak on drug policy issues. Often, journalists will reach out to ask for background information or your perspective on an article. You may also be asked to take part in an interview, either to inform an article or for a news segment. This is an exciting opportunity, so here's what you can do to make the most out of it:

1. Respond quickly.

- Journalists work on short deadlines with tight turnaround times. If a reporter contacts you, reply to them as soon as possible so you don't miss out on an important opportunity. If you are not available, refer them to a colleague or other expert source who can respond.

2. Ask them some questions first.

- Though it's important to act fast, you should also know who you're talking to and why. If you don't know the person contacting you, take a moment to research them and their organization. Ask about the subject of their article or interview, their deadline, and their audience. For radio, podcasts, or TV, ask about the show's format. Will there be other guests? How long is the segment? Will it be live, taped, and/or edited? You can always ask a journalist to send you interview questions ahead of time. Not all journalists will do this, but many will.

3. Prepare accordingly.

- Identify your key talking points in advance. The above guide offers many messages in support of safer supply and legal regulation. Make sure to tailor these messages to the questions asked and your intended audience.

WRITING OP-EDS

An op-ed is a brief (750–800 words) article that represents a guest contributor's point of view. A good op-ed weaves together the author's perspective, research, and current events to make a compelling argument. It can be a powerful way to spark public discourse on safer supply and legal regulation. The following tips can help you craft a persuasive op-ed:

1. Choose a timely and relevant topic.

- Timing is key to maximizing the reach of your article. Op-eds often use current events as a hook to get readers interested. Did a law just get passed? Was a report recently published? Was there a recent anniversary, milestone, or remembrance day? Connect your op-ed to recent events to give your readers a concrete reason to be interested.

2. Form a strong thesis statement.

- State your main argument in the opening paragraph. Your thesis should be clear and concise, telling readers why they should care about your argument.

3. Know your audience.

- Tailor your arguments to resonate with the publication's general audience as well as your target audience.

4. Provide specific examples; tell a story.

- Stories are often more compelling than hard data. Sharing a personal anecdote or another's experience (with their permission, of course) gets readers to see how an issue impacts real people.

5. Issue a call to action.

- An effective op-ed will prompt your audience to do more than just read your article, such as vote in favor of a referendum or donate to a cause. The next section will provide more strategies to issue a powerful call to action.

6. Be clear and concise.

- Op-eds are short, quick, and to the point. Use simple language and avoid the use of jargon to keep your article brief and accessible.

7. Proofread and seek feedback from peers.

- Take the time to revise and edit your op-ed for clarity and coherence. Consider sending your draft to a couple of colleagues to get their insight.

8. Follow submission guidelines.

- Always be sure to check your target publication's rules and guidelines for op-ed submissions.

ISSUING A CALL TO ACTION

Now that your readers (or listeners) are invested, it's time to get them to take action. Issuing a call to action (CTA) is a powerful way to prompt your audience to take a specific step. In any form of persuasive communication, here are some tips on how to effectively issue a call to action:

1. Implore your audience to do one specific and relevant action.

- People often don't know where to start when it comes to advancing a cause they care about. Therefore, you can offer your audience a low-threshold way to get involved. Some examples include:
 - *Vote in favor of a drug decriminalization referendum or another piece of progressive drug policy.*
 - *Donate to a harm reduction or progressive drug policy organization.*
 - *Educate others about the dangers of the illicit supply and the benefits of safer supply and legal regulation.*
 - *Share the Safer Supply Toolkit with your friends and colleagues.*

2. Emphasize the urgency of the crisis.

- You want your audience to act yesterday. Don't let your audience procrastinate. Use action verbs and persuasive language to motivate readers & listeners to take action. Some examples include:
 - Call your representative and urge them to vote in favor of a bill.
 - Come to an upcoming town hall to support a policy proposal.
 - Sign up for a webinar before spots run out.

3. Frame the action within a larger strategy.

- One of the biggest challenges of political advocacy is getting people to keep showing up. Thus, you should always be ready to share what comes next. If you're encouraging them to vote for a referendum, highlight other states with similar laws. If you want them to donate to an organization, discuss how that money will be used to support people who use drugs. Direct them to volunteer opportunities. Provide as many occasions as possible to get involved. In doing so, you will cultivate a community of dedicated activists that will show up again and again.

FURTHER READING

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