Community-Informed Drug Policy

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The Biden administration unveiled the country's inaugural National Drug Control Strategy in April. While it still includes law enforcement initiatives, like stopping drug trafficking and targeting drug cartel financial networks, it is notable for a different reason.

"This new strategy is the first ever to emphasize working directly with people who use drugs to prevent overdose and infectious disease transmissions, improve their physical, mental and social well-being and offer flexible options for accessing medical care and substance use treatment," says Harold Phillips, director of the White House National Office of AIDS Policy.

For instance, the strategy uses a "whole of government" approach, including integrating harm reduction strategies into the plan. These include initiatives such as expanding access to the overdose-reversal drug naloxone, fentanyl test strips and syringe exchange programs—approaches people in the HIV field have advocated for years. (See "A Change Is Coming to Scott County.")

The strategy also draws from another approach spearheaded by HIV advocates: It encourages adding health care clinics and other services at syringe exchange sites. The IDEA Exchange in Miami, for instance, tests for and treats HIV at the exchange and allows clients to leave their medication in on-site lockers to prevent them from being lost or stolen.

In addition, the strategy calls for expanding housing options and community programs for people who use drugs as well as making medication-assisted therapy for addiction more widely available. All of these approaches are backed by research showing that lower barriers to care lead to better health outcomes.

"This evidence-based approach," Phillips says, "builds trust and engagement with people at risk for an overdose."

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