$200K in Grants From Syringe Access Fund to Boost Harm Reduction Programs

The advocacy grants allow groups in Indiana and Oklahoma to expand services including HIV, hepatitis C and syringe exchange programs.

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The Syringe Access Fund is excited to announce the awarding of two advocacy grants, totaling $100,000 each, to the Indiana Recovery Alliance and the Oklahoma Harm Reduction Alliance. These organizations are committed to expanding comprehensive harm reduction services to people who use drugs, including syringe exchange services, primary care, testing and treatment for HIV and viral hepatitis, and linkage to medication for opioid use disorder and substance use disorder treatment. These grants will bolster support for harm reduction in Indiana and Oklahoma by introducing community education campaigns and legislation to legalize evidence-based health services for people who use drugs.

Indiana Recovery Alliance is a grassroots organization that shifts resources and power to people who use drugs. The organization is run entirely by people who have lived experience with injection drug use, sex work, incarceration and who have survived Hepatitis C and overdose. IRA staff seek to reduce both the individual and structural harms caused by racialized drug policy through direct action and advocacy. Most importantly, IRA staff create space where people who use drugs can experience love and respect.

IRA has been striving to eliminate the sunset clause, a provision of a law that it will automatically be terminated after a fixed period, around syringe services legalization. The Syringe Access Fund award will allow the organization to build coalition across the state for advocacy efforts to remove the sunset clause, strengthen the Good Samaritan Act, and push for decriminalization of local distributions of syringes and naloxone. Unless the Indiana state legislature votes to remove the sunset clause, legal syringe service programs in nine different Indiana counties will cease to exist by June 30, 2021.

Oklahoma Harm Reduction Alliance was created in 2019 to address vast rates of overdose, viral Hepatitis, incarceration and a lack of harm reduction services throughout the state. It is a grassroots organization that meets people where they are through advocacy, education, policy and health services. OKHRA is committed to supporting Oklahomans who use drugs while

improving public health in the community through education and advocacy. The organization's services include mail-based Naloxone and harm reduction services, online harm reduction education and support groups, and referrals for clients who need access to syringe services programs and related substance use services.

With support from the Syringe Access Fund, OKHRA will advocate for statewide legalization of syringe services. The beginning of COVID-19 halted the progress of HB 3028, which would have legalized the distribution of syringes. OKHRA will call on people who use drugs, the Oklahoma State Health Department, Muscogee Creek Nation Health Program, the Cherokee Nation, the North Tulsa Health Department and legislators to work together to pass state legalization of syringe services.

Despite ongoing challenges with the COVID-19 pandemic, staff members from both organizations exhibit passion for their work and are emboldened by the new opportunities these awards have created.

"I am excited to work with the community to destigmatize substance use and incarceration in our state," said Hailey Ferguson of OKHRA. "We have the highest rate of incarceration in the nation and I hope that we can be agents of change who remind Oklahomans that folks who are incarcerated and people who use drugs are human beings worthy of happiness, access to housing and respect."

Chris Abert of Indiana Recovery Alliance shared similar thoughts.

"It means a lot to us that the Syringe Access Fund continues to invest in harm reduction policy change, particularly in conservative states like Indiana," Abert said. "We are inspired by its commitment to ensure that directly impacted people have the resources they need to lead advocacy and systems change efforts."

The Syringe Access Fund, a collaborative grantmaking initiative supported by AIDS United, Elton John AIDS Foundation, H. van Ameringen Foundation and Levi Strauss Foundation, seeks to reduce the health, psychosocial and socioeconomic disparities experienced by people who use drugs. AIDS United began administering and managing the Syringe Access Fund in 2004. To date, the Syringe Access Fund has awarded more than $17 million to support syringe services programs and advocacy to advance syringe access.

For more information about the Syringe Access Fund, please visit the AIDS United website. If you are interested in joining the Syringe Access Fund, we want to hear from you. Please reach out to SAF@aidsunited.org.

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