# Atlantic City Votes to Close the State's Largest Syringe Service Program

Last year, more people than ever died of overdoses in the U.S. Now is the time to #SaveOasis Drop-in Center. The fight isn't over!

July 27, 2021 By AIDS United

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Earlier this month, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released data showing that more than 93,000 people died of an overdose in the United States in 2020 — the most in a single year since the CDC began collecting this data.

One would hope the revelation of such a grim statistic would cause federal, state and local governments to double down on efforts to combat the overdose epidemic and provide much-needed health care for people who use drugs. However, on Wednesday evening, the Atlantic City Council responded by voting to shut down Oasis Drop-In Center, one of only seven syringe services programs in the state of New Jersey.

Despite testimony from roughly 50 harm reduction advocates, public health officials and people who utilized the SSP's services advocating to keep the Oasis Drop-In Center open, the Atlantic City Council voted 7-2 to shutter the SSP. The meeting, which was contentious and often heartbreaking, was the first one open to public comment since the council's first vote to close the SSP this past June. This meeting was cut short by Atlantic City Council officials after 2 1/2 hours of public statements, with dozens of additional advocates being denied their chance to speak, including Carol Harney, the President of the South Jersey AIDS Alliance which runs the Oasis Drop-In Center.

## No matter what the Atlantic City Council says, the facts remain:

## ????Syringe access prevents overdoses

# ????Syringe access prevents new HIV diagnoses

# ????The majority of clients of Oasis are from Atlantic City

# — NJ Harm Reduction Coalition (@NJHarmReduction)

## July 23, 2021

The closure of the Oasis Drop-In Center could not come at a worse time. In addition to taking place following a year in which overdose deaths increased by nearly 30% nationwide, it's also happening in a moment where stigma against people who use drugs and aggression towards SSPs are extremely high in certain parts of the country. Atlantic City is now the third local or state government to forcibly close or place crippling restrictions on SSPs in the last four months, following the actions of elected officials in Scott County, Indiana, and West Virginia.

In all of these instances, opposition to SSPs has been rooted in stigma and in opposition to public health best practices. Elected officials in these states inevitably focus on easily disproved talking points. For example, many of these elected officials will say that SSPs create excess needle litter and crime, encourage drug use and will fixate on "outsiders" who cross state, county or city lines to receive services. Their focus is rarely, if ever, on the health and wellbeing of people who use drugs. Their talking points couldn't be further from the truth or more damaging for those who use drugs.

In reality, SSPs make people who use drugs five times more likely to access treatment. SSPs reduce the amount of litter in their programs by providing a safe space for people who are injection drug users to dispose of their needles. In Atlantic City's case, 6 in 10 individuals receiving care lived directly within Atlantic City limits and fewer than 10% of individuals drove from more than two miles outside of the city limits.

"The absence of a service does not mean the absence of a problem," said Drew Gibson, senior policy manager for HIV and harm reduction at AIDS United, who spoke during the meeting. "People that use drugs will continue to be in Atlantic City. But instead of receiving the health care that they need, they will be showing up in emergency rooms with abscesses, with endocarditis, with HIV and with viral hepatitis."

Wesley McWhite, policy and development manager for Hyacinth AIDS Foundation in New Jersey, was prevented from speaking at the council meeting but took to social media afterward to speak about the ways in which the Oasis Drop-In Center's closure will harm Black Atlantic City residents,

who constitute 65% of people living with HIV in the city.

"'Saving your community' includes people that use drugs", McWhite wrote on Twitter after the meeting. "Black people have been so tormented by the war on drugs that a viable solution and proven methods of care are shunned because of the stigma, shame and judgment we hold against people who use drugs. Not fully embracing syringe access programs, harm reduction and supportive services for drug users to use safely is rooted in anti-Blackness."

> The U.S. has a history of using drugs to target and criminalize communities of color. After 50 years of harmful carceral approaches, taking evidence based public health approaches are long overdue.https://t.co/ZiANbjX1Lb
> — AIDS United (@AIDS_United) July 25, 2021

AIDS United is committed to ending the HIV and overdose syndemics in the United States. The only way in which those realities come to pass is if people who use drugs have unfettered access to SSPs and the quality health care services they provide. We call on New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy, Lt. Gov. Sheila Oliver and all state legislators in New Jersey to support the Oasis Drop-In Center and help other counties in southern New Jersey to set up their own SSPs so that more of your constituents can receive the care they deserve.

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