

New Directions for New York: A Public Health and Safety Approach to Drug Policy

A State and City-focused Conference co-hosted by
The New York Academy of Medicine and the Drug Policy Alliance

Thursday Evening, January 22 and Friday January 23, 2009
New York Academy of Medicine, 1216 5th Avenue, New York City
www.newdirectionsnewyork.org

Conference Statement of Purpose and Goals

Illicit drug misuse and dependence in New York is a leading cause of morbidity and mortality and one of the state's most intractable public health problems in its own right. Moreover, when considered as a contributing cause of death, or "co-morbidity," illicit drug misuse becomes an even more pervasive public health issue. In cases where substance misuse is a factor along with multiple other chronic diseases—so-called "high cost cases" in the Medicaid program—it can also significantly impact the overall cost of health care. These cases are now the focus of much State health care financing policy.

For decades, New York State has expended significant resources on drug prevention, interdiction, and incarceration of drug users with relatively modest effect in stopping substance misuse or reducing the morbidity and mortality associated with it. In fact, evidence increasingly suggests that over-reliance on criminal justice approaches is too narrow a strategy and does not take into account the many determinants of health of individuals, families and communities affected by this problem. Recent joint hearings in the New York State Assembly, convened by six committee chairs (in Codes, Corrections, Judiciary, Public Health, Social Services, and Alcoholism and Drug Abuse), outlined possibilities for a new public health framework that offers a more comprehensive, effective, and coordinated response to illicit substance misuse and dependence.

While New York has many fine prevention, treatment and related health programs for drug users, not all health care providers, legislators, treatment providers, public safety personnel, and community advocates have a shared understanding of substance misuse and dependence as a

public health problem. This inhibits a coordinated public health response to preventing illicit substance misuse and to alleviating the damage it causes to the health and well being of individuals, families, and communities. The fiscal costs of New York’s current drug policies—with their focus on incarceration and policing—are significant, while the current investment in prevention and treatment services are, by comparison, modest. Stakeholders who could be working together to resolve these difficult issues are often in adversarial relationships that diminish the ability to make real changes to benefit individuals, families, and communities affected by substance misuse and dependence.

In order to cross these divides and develop joint strategies to move towards a more effective approach to drug policy in New York City and State, The New York Academy of Medicine and the Drug Policy Alliance are co-hosting a two-day conference in New York City. Drawing from disciplines such as public health, drug treatment, harm reduction, medicine, public safety, and criminal justice, the Conference will convene key political leaders, government officials, community organizations, leading academics, service providers, advocates, and people directly impacted by the range of drug policies in New York City and State. This Conference seeks to build the mutual understanding and shared courses of action necessary to advance proposals that will more effectively reduce illicit substance misuse and its associated harms.

Conference Objectives

- Learn what a “public health approach to drug policy” means and how it would help individuals and communities
- Discover the role of national, state, and city government in determining drug policy
- Consider the effectiveness of approaches tried in other states and in other countries
- Brainstorm new approaches to difficult policy and implementation problems
- Foster connections among groups that have not traditionally worked together, but can together increase their effectiveness
- Become familiar with the research evidence that can help advocates and policy makers develop effective policies and strategies and determine what further research is needed

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For further information on the conference, including sponsorship opportunities, please contact:
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