March Newsletter

Groundbreaking Oregon Ballot Initiative Prioritizes Health and Harm Reduction over Criminal Punishment for Drug Use

An Oregon ballot initiative campaign backed by Drug Policy Action, the advocacy and political arm of the Drug Policy Alliance, has collected enough signatures to qualify for the ballot in November.

The proposed initiative, the Drug Addiction Treatment and Recovery Act, would shift Oregon’s response to drug use to a health-based approach, while also replacing criminal penalties for minor drug possession with a civil fine that serves to incentivize people found possessing drugs to undergo a voluntary health assessment. The expanded services would be funded through an estimated $100 million of existing marijuana tax revenue, which has been far greater than the state initially forecast.

Oregon currently ranks nearly last in the nation in access to treatment. The measure seeks to expand the availability of treatment, peer support and recovery services, housing, and harm reduction interventions. Additionally, by removing criminal penalties for simple possession, the initiative will encourage people to seek treatment and other services that they might otherwise avoid for fear of criminal consequences. In doing so, the measure will remove barriers to treatment and help save lives.

While the fundamental elements of the measure are based on successful models used in other parts of the United States and around the world, the details are tailored specifically to Oregon. Local groups partnered with DPA experts to draft the initiative. Those consulted include people who work in treatment, addiction, and recovery, as well as specialists on equity, economics, criminal justice, civil liberties, and more.

“Oregonians have always been early adopters of drug policies that shift the emphasis towards health and away from punishment,” said Theshia Naidoo, Managing Director of Criminal Justice Law and Policy, Drug Policy Action. “The
idea behind this groundbreaking effort is simple: people suffering from addiction need help, not criminal punishments. Instead of arresting and jailing people for using drugs, the measure would fund a range of services to help people get their lives back on track.

DPA Announces Kassandra Frederique as Next Executive Director

DPA's Board of Directors has selected acclaimed drug policy reform activist Kassandra Frederique as the organization’s next Executive Director. Frederique, who currently serves as DPA's Managing Director of Policy Advocacy and Campaigns, will assume the role on Tuesday, September 8, the day after Labor Day.

“There is a lot at stake in this moment, and to be afforded the chance to lead the Drug Policy Alliance is a responsibility I do not take lightly,” said Kassandra Frederique. “I’m looking forward to drawing on the rich tapestry of ideas represented by DPA and the drug policy reform movement to build humane and compassionate solutions to the failures of the drug war. I am humbled by this opportunity and am excited to do my part to shape the next chapter in drug policy, one of the most important issues at the intersection of autonomy and justice.”

Frederique has been an architect of innovative campaigns to expand the debate around the impacts of policing, the importance of legalizing marijuana with social and racial justice at the forefront, the need to engage municipalities and state legislatures in comprehensive harm reduction strategies, and the breadth of the overdose crisis within communities of color. She has mobilized cities to rethink their approach to drug policy from the ground up, and helped bring the dialogue around supervised consumption services to the national level with her strategic organizing and partner development.
Throughout her work, Frederique has been a powerful advocate for working closely with people who have been directly impacted by the war on drugs, and she has built strong alliances with partners in New York and beyond. Her work has been featured in the New York Times, MSNBC, USA Today, National Public Radio, and the Netflix documentary “Grass is Greener.”

“We could not be more excited that a leader with Kassandra’s strategic vision, integrity, and passion will take the reins at DPA,” said board chair Derek Hodel. “By any measure, Kassandra is a force to reckon with – she has significantly influenced drug policy reform in New York, and has helped to shape the national drug policy conversation. She will be a terrific executive director.”

DPA’s former Executive Director Maria McFarland Sánchez-Moreno stepped down on March 6 to join Human Rights Watch. Until Frederique assumes the role in September, Richard Burns, who has extensive experience as a long-time executive director and interim CEO in many settings, most recently at Lambda Legal, will serve as Interim Executive Director of DPA.

Read more.

New York Could Pass Marijuana Legalization in Coming Weeks

Governor Andrew Cuomo has vowed to make marijuana legalization a “top priority” in New York's budget, which must be approved by April 1. He has said that he did not expect marijuana legalization to be passed by the Senate outside of the budget, but that he was “optimistic" about it being passed as part of it.

He has previously announced that he will be traveling to four states that have legalized marijuana to meet with officials and investigate the success of reform.

Norman Birenbaum, the recently-appointed director of Cannabis Programs for the New York State Executive Chamber, has echoed Cuomo’s support for reform: “[Legalization] is the right thing to do for public health and public safety. The reality of the situation is we have adult-use cannabis today. The problem is it’s not regulated, and it is provided through the illicit market.”

Only two years ago, Cuomo was firmly against marijuana legalization. DPA’s multiyear advocacy campaign, led by Kassandra Frederique, played a pivotal role in moving him into the support column and making legalization a key issue in the
2019 legislative session.

Learn more about Start SMART NY, the campaign to end marijuana prohibition and repair the harms to communities, convened by the Drug Policy Alliance in partnership with groups dedicated to ending marijuana prohibition.

Take 5 Minutes to Test Your Knowledge of Current Drug Policies

At the Drug Policy Alliance, we truly value your interest in ending the drug war and want to help you stay informed on the issues. As someone who fights for reform, it’s important to know the facts so that you can continue to challenge the fears and prejudices created by drug prohibition.

Take 5 minutes to test your knowledge of current drug policies and learn more about our latest reform efforts with this quiz!

And if you haven’t watched our new video series, “Matters of Substance,” be sure to check it out! These short videos break down important drug policy concepts in under 60 seconds.

None of the incredible work we do here at DPA would be possible without your compassion and interest in drug policy reform. We are honored to have you by our side.

Take the quiz.

DPA Clips, Podcasts and Stories

New Mexico Marijuana Legalization Bill Blocked, For Now

A bill to legalize marijuana for adult use in New Mexico has failed to clear the state Senate. Senate Bill 115 was supported by Governor Michelle Lujan-Grisham, and would have established a regulated marijuana trade that could have generated over $100 million in tax revenue. On February
12, the state’s Senate Judiciary Committee tabled the bill, and it was not reconsidered before the end of the short legislative session on February 20.

Emily Kaltenbach, DPA’s New Mexico State Director, said the tabling meant that “the communities that have been most impacted by prohibition will continue to be left out in the cold, along with those that could have benefitted from the investment made in substance use disorder treatment and education.”

DPA was directly involved in the bill’s development, as Kaltenbach served on the Governor's Working Group on Cannabis Legalization. Many of the working group’s recommendations reflect DPA’s priorities, including creating equity in the marketplace, reinvesting back into communities most harmed by prohibition, protecting the medical marijuana program, safeguarding children, and establishing strong consumer protections.

Governor Lujan Grisham has said that she is “disappointed but not deterred” by the committee’s decision, vowing that her administration will “keep working to get it done.”

Read DPA's statement on the bill's tabling.

The First Legal Supervised Consumption Site in the U.S. Moves Closer to Opening

In late February, officials from Philadelphia community-based organization Safehouse, announced that they would be opening the country’s first legal supervised consumption services (SCS) in the city. The facility was set to begin operating in the first week of March, but its opening has now been put on hold due to opposition from the building owner and some local residents.

SCS allow people to use pre-obtained drugs in safer environments, with sterile equipment and drug checking supplies, and in the presence of trained staff or peers who can prevent a fatal overdose and help connect participants to services. Nobody has ever died in any of the dozens of supervised consumption sites currently operating around the world, and thousands have been saved from overdose, HIV and hepatitis infection, and other blood-borne illnesses.

The Trump administration has vehemently opposed SCS and, in early 2019, the Department of Justice sued Safehouse for attempting to open such a
site. However, DPA helped coordinate the submission of over a dozen amicus briefs in support of Safehouse and the federal judge on the case ruled that the proposed site would not violate federal law. This was a breakthrough in the pursuit of harm reduction access, and a rebuke of the Trump administration’s ideological agenda of stigma and punishment.

Read more.

Drug Policy in the News

San Francisco Examiner: SF to Introduce Legislation Authorizing Safe Injection Sites

Filter Mag: Bloomberg Is Wrong to Throw "Dealers" Under His Campaign Bus

Vice News: The First Legal Safe Injection Site in the U.S. Is Set to Open Next Week. Here's Why That Matters.

Yahoo: DEA: The U.S. Opioid Crisis Is 'Ever-Increasing'

TalkingDrugs: Groundbreaking Oregon Ballot Initiative Prioritizes Health over Punishment for Drug Use

U.S. News: Fate of Pot Sales in New York is Unclear

Donate

Put DPA in your will or estate plan. Find out more about how to join The Ashawna Hailey Planned Giving Society today.