



2020: The Year of Imagining a World with **No Overdose Deaths**

People's Action Overdose Crisis Cohort
February 2021

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Who We Are

Throughout the challenging year of 2020, People's Action's Overdose Crisis Cohort worked to uplift the long-running epidemic of overdose in the United States. The Cohort aims to develop a multiracial strategy that unites urban, suburban and rural communities and shifts responses to the crisis from those that stigmatize and criminalize drug users to those that center compassion and open up space for public health and harm reduction solutions at the local, state, and federal levels. We ground our work in an understanding of the racist underpinnings and racialized impact of the War on Drugs, explicitly recognizing its impact on today's context, while simultaneously recognizing the hardships faced by rural and white working class communities.

We are working to bridge the gap and make connections across race (black, brown, white), geography (urban, suburban, and rural), and experience (drug users, people in recovery, and people who have lost loved ones). The Overdose Crisis Cohort brings together Down Home North Carolina/We Are Down Home (DHNC), Hoosier Action Resource Center, Maine People's Resource Center (MPRC), Michigan United (MI United), New Jersey Resource Project (NJRP), Progressive Maryland Education Fund, Rights and Democracy Education Fund in VT & NH (RAD), River Valley Organizing/UnHarming Ohio, Showing Up for Racial Justice - Ohio (SURJ-Ohio), Solutions Oriented Addiction Response in WV (SOAR/WVCAG), and Voices of Community Activists and Leaders NY (VOCAL-NY). With member organizations spanning from a number of states with varying political and cultural contexts, the importance of bridging varying yet related experiences of overdose is of the utmost importance. Drug Policy Alliance and the National Harm Reduction Coalition are our close national allies and partners in this work and provide technical assistance and strategic support along the way.

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The War on Drugs has the potential to be one of the great uniters - or dividers.

The opioid crisis brought the impact of the War on Drugs to the broadest scope of people in U.S. history. It can either result in new levels of social destruction and a renewed police and penal state, or a new multiracial political alliance that uplifts evidence and people-based solutions against criminalization and for harm reduction practices.

Overdose Crisis Cohort in Action in 2020

Throughout 2020, the Overdose Crisis Cohort served as an important space for groups to come together, learn from each other, and gain a deeper understanding of the landscape to end the Overdose Crisis. 2020 also served as an opportunity for Cohort members to act together. The two primary ways that the cohort acted together was through developing and participating in a messaging research project and through acting in concert together on International Overdose Awareness Day.

Messaging Project

The goal of the Messaging Project was to identify which narratives and messaging approaches helped to “build the bigger we” to engage community members around the overdose crisis, harm reduction, and drug policy change. So often overdose is seen as an individual problem based out of personal failure, but we know that there are significant structural elements that shape how to view, treat and engage with overdose. The cohort was curious to know if the messaging they had been using was supporting moving a narrative that reflects our values and understanding of the crisis. Therefore, we developed a messaging research project with ASO Communications, Lake Research Partners and

HIT Strategies. Through regular meetings (sometimes weekly; sometimes biweekly) as well as email communication in between meetings, cohort members had the opportunity to share feedback on research design, scripts and language for surveys. In addition to the regular meetings, the Overdose Crisis Cohort offered support to the research team through language analysis, narrative development, focus groups, developing an advocate pool to test the language with, engaging in street and community testing, and offering feedback along the way. [See summary of the messaging guidance that was developed based on the findings here.](#)



Harm Reduction Strategies: Any range of public health interventions designed to reduce the harm for individuals as well as lessen the negative social and physical consequences associated with substance use. Strategies include but are not limited to distribution of naloxone, distribution of syringes, and safer injection sites.

Once the messaging guidance was released, People's Action Institute and the Overdose Crisis Cohort hosted four briefings to ensure that the messaging guidance reached individuals engaged throughout the field so that more people could incorporate the findings into their ongoing communication, approaches, advocacy work, and grantmaking strategies. The first briefing was internal for the Cohort members who had been involved in the development and execution of the research project. The briefing focused on reviewing the main findings and working with member groups to refine the messages to work within their state and organizational context.

We then held three additional briefings to share the findings of the messaging project as well as uplift the work of our cohort. Those briefings included a briefing more

broadly for the People's Action Institute's network beyond the cohort, a briefing for allies and partners outside of our network to share the findings more broadly, and a briefing to a group of nineteen criminal justice and substance use funders. Following the partner and ally briefing, People's Action Institute also sponsored an additional session covering the history of the drug war, led by VOCAL NY, as a way to provide additional background on the issues to some of the participants which helped to deepen the analysis around the role of racism and systems in overdose. Each of these briefings was very engaging with active participation from attendees.

The Overdose Crisis Cohort continues to work collectively to integrate the messaging guidance in our collective federal-level work as well as in state and local work.

Core Messaging Guidance

- Establish shared values
- Name the villains, their tactics and motives
- Highlight collective health & wellbeing AND affirm a stance against criminalization
- Provide a collective call to action to achieve a better future through specific, proven policies

International Overdose Awareness Day

Annually on August 30, communities across the globe honor International Overdose Awareness Day. Oftentimes, activities are centered on sharing the stories of loved ones who have passed away through overdose with the goal being to eliminate stigma related to overdose.

The Cohort saw this as an opportunity to act together to lift up personal stories, integrate newly released messaging guidance, and point our audiences toward structural-level solutions. People's Action Institute led the way by creating a video, establishing a platform to collect testimonies, cultivating a social media guide, creating an action portal and launching a website. In addition, Cohort members hosted various memorials and actions in communities across the network.

See [full summary of #IOAD here](#) which includes highlights of Cohort members' local activities.

At the federal level, the Cohort used #IOAD to uplift the need for harm reduction to be included in the next COVID-19 relief package. By mid-2020, it was clear that overdose rates were skyrocketing amid the pandemic as economic stress combined with social isolation and restriction of in-person care and service access. The Cohort created and shared out an action portal focused on the impact of COVID-19 on the overdose crisis and the need for robust investment in harm reduction in the next COVID-19 relief package. A total of 2,926 advocacy actions were taken through the portal.



COVID-19 has exacerbated the overdose crisis.

From the CDC: “over 81,000 drug overdose deaths occurred in the United States in the 12 months ending in May 2020, the highest number of overdose deaths ever recorded in a 12-month period.” [Read more here.](#)

Cohort Member 2020 Highlights

Down Home North Carolina incorporated the findings from the messaging project into a virtual town hall in early October. The town hall was focused on ending overdose in Haywood and Jackson counties.

After finding out that State Senator Ron Grooms was considering voting against the extension of syringe service programs in Indiana, **Hoosier Action** was able to mobilize quickly to hold a powerful in-district meeting which featured a wide variety of stakeholders including community members, faith leaders, doctors, current and former drug users, business leaders, and public health experts. Hoosier Action kept up the heat throughout the bill process and won an extension to this vital public health program!

Maine People's Resource Center had the chance to [confront US Senator Collins on an airplane](#) about the overdose crisis. They decided to use the opportunity to elevate the power of the pharmaceutical lobby as an important “villain” to help shape Mainers understanding of one of the causes of the overdose crisis.

In mid-June, **Michigan United** brought the overdose crisis and the findings of the messaging project with them to Michigan Capitol Week. One highlight of capitol week is that Representative Joe Bellino shared his personal story related to the overdose crisis and started to adopt the messaging language discussed in the research phase.

New Jersey Resource Project member leader authored [this OpEd](#) to further the reach of the messaging project findings and elevate systems-focused solutions.





Advocating for COVID Relief

Money for Harm Reduction

937
advocates

4,242
messages sent

Email (4,170); Twitter (72)



Progressive Maryland Education Fund sent over 50,000 texts, held over 125 one-on-one meetings with volunteers around drug policy, and had 15 volunteers take multiple actions in support of harm reduction. One of those action moments was at the Baltimore City Council hearing on Overdose Prevention Sites, where MPEF volunteer, Janice, submitted [testimony](#) sharing her personal story of losing a son to the overdose crisis and how a prevention site could help save lives so that people do not have to use alone - like her son did.

In 2020, **River Valley Organizing/UnHarming Ohio** made Ohio history - the Scioto County Health Department turned over operations of the syringe service provision (SSP) to the organization. This is the first time in Ohio that an SSP has been run by a community organization.

In response to the pandemic, **Solutions Oriented Addiction Response (SOAR)** shifted their organization's focus from being primarily an advocacy organization to offering direct mutual aid and harm reduction supplies to the community serving over 250 people bi-weekly. SOAR is now the largest naloxone distributor in West Virginia and also runs the largest grassroots-based, community-led harm reduction effort in the state. The messaging project findings have been integral in supporting SOAR in pushing back against stigma-based hate that has popped up in response to their work.

VOCAL NY led and won a campaign to pressure New York State and New York City to implement a methadone delivery system during the pandemic. This important victory improved methadone delivery for people in isolation because of being COVID positive or symptomatic, becoming the first in the nation methadone delivery system for people who are isolating.



Where We Are Headed

In September 2020, People's Action Institute hired Ellen Glover as the Drug Policy, Harm Reduction and Criminal Justice Campaign Director. Ellen is the first full-time hire for the work and brings additional capacity to move the work forward in the year to come. With so much accomplished in 2020 without full-time dedicated national staff support, imagine what we can do in 2021! The Cohort has decided to focus our collective efforts in base building, campaigning for concrete policy victories, and moving the needle on the narrative related to overdose, harm reduction and drug policy.

We are exploring innovative base building strategies including Online2Offline Organizing and deep canvassing as well as traditional organizing outreach and engagement. Online2Offline focuses on using digital and organizing expertise to engage new constituencies through social media platforms - in particular through Facebook. Deep canvassing involves candid, two-way conversations where canvassers ask individuals to share their relevant, emotionally significant experiences and reflect on them aloud. These values-based conversations help individuals discover the dissonance that exists between their life experience and things they believe to be true. The goal of both Online2Offline and deep canvassing centered in the Overdose Crisis Cohort is to significantly build out the base of power across geographic and racial divides in order to grow membership bases as well as direct support for issue organizing and advocacy.

On the policy campaigning front, almost every organization in the cohort is in the midst of moving forward strategic campaigns related to harm reduction or drug policy and criminal justice reform in their state or local communities. Those strategic campaigns range from fighting for state funding for syringe exchange programs to pushing to legalize marijuana to working to stop jail expansions. Collectively, we are narrowing in on our federal level policy priorities and continue our fight for harm reduction funding to be included in each and every COVID relief package.

The Cohort also is continuing its work around implementing the messaging guidance and ensuring that those messages resonate in each organization's unique state and context. In the first half of 2021, we will solidify our collective values and vision to root our work in the years to come. Additionally, we are exploring avenues for political education and amplifying our messaging and narratives through media engagement.

Interested? Questions? Reach out to Ellen Glover, Drug Policy, Harm Reduction and Criminal Justice Campaign Director, at (952) 334-6348 or email e.glover@peoplesaction.org.

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