

PEOPLE'S  
ACTION!



NO MORE  
**DRUG**  
WAR!

OVERDOSE CRISIS COHORT 2021 REPORT

May 2022



## WHY WE FIGHT

We believe in strong, healthy communities, where everyone - no matter what you look like, who you are or where you're from - has what they need to stay alive and thrive. Whether you live in the Ohio River Valley or on the Jersey Shore, on the lowlands of Scott County, Indiana or in the streets of New York City, we all want to see our friends and family members live long, fulfilling lives.

But when it comes to the overdose crisis ravaging our communities, politicians in the pockets of pharmaceutical lobbyists and private prisons try to distract us from the role they have played in allowing over 104,000 of our friends, neighbors, family members and coworkers to die from preventable drug overdoses. Instead of offering proven public health solutions that save lives, these politicians lock up our loved ones who use drugs so they can collect kickbacks from private prison lobbyists, who profit off of having more of us behind bars. They let drug corporations flood our communities with addictive painkillers, while healthcare lobbyists deny us the treatments we need. Then, they try to make us fear each other for what we look like or where we live, so we don't join together to demand proven solutions.

But we know better. No matter what we look like or where we come from - whether black, white or brown, from big cities, rural communities or small towns - the overdose crisis reminds us that we are all human. Our ability to get and stay well depends on everyone having what we need to prevent, treat, and recover from illness. Now is the time to join together and demand measures to stop preventable overdose deaths, and to pull through this crisis by pulling together.

The People's Action Overdose Crisis Cohort fights for proven solutions that keep us alive through this public health crisis - passing the Mainstreaming Addiction Treatment (MAT) Act, funding harm reduction measures, and stopping the expansion of the drug war.

By following the evidence and the voices of those most directly impacted by the War on Drugs and our overdose crisis, we can build communities where families are kept together and those who struggle get the support they need to get and stay well.



## WHO WE ARE

People's Action's Overdose Crisis Cohort unites urban, suburban, small town, and rural communities and works to shift responses to the overdose crisis from those that stigmatize and criminalize people who use drugs to ones 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 that the politicians like Richard Nixon who launched the War On Drugs over fifty years ago did so explicitly to target Black and brown communities, and to divide us with fear, based on the color of our skin or how much money we make. This false narrative continues to divide us, and makes it harder to overcome the shared challenges of the overdose crisis for urban, rural and working-class communities.

We know we are stronger together. That's why we are working to bridge this gap and make connections across race, geography, and experience, to include everyone directly affected by this crisis: people who use drugs, people in recovery, and people who have lost loved ones.

The Overdose Crisis Cohort brings together Down Home North Carolina, Hoosier Action (Indiana), Maine People's Alliance, Michigan People's Campaign, New Jersey Organizing Project, Progressive Maryland, Rights and Democracy in VT & NH, River Valley Organizing/UnHarming Ohio, Showing Up for Racial Justice - Ohio, and Voices of Community Activists and Leaders NY (VOCAL-NY).

## North Star Visions



**Ending the  
War on Drugs**



**Compassion & Public  
Health, Not Punishment  
& Criminalization**



**Significant Investment  
in the Care that  
Puts People First**



## BUILDING THE POWER WE NEED TO WIN

People's Action's Overdose Crisis Cohort met with dozens of Members of Congress throughout 2021 and organized days of action to raise awareness about harm reduction and treatment solutions, and moved people all across the country to voice their

support for these solutions to their Members of Congress. This has created the momentum we now see, with over 240 bipartisan co-sponsors in the House and four in the Senate for the Mainstreaming Addiction Treatment (MAT) Act.

### Federal Level Demand

#### **Pass the Mainstreaming Addiction Treatment Act (H.R. 1384 / S. 445)**

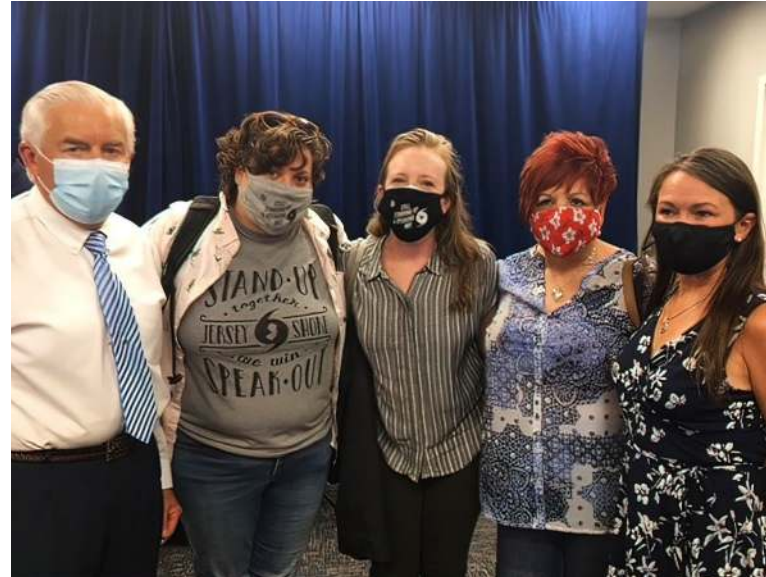
The MAT Act would remove outdated barriers that healthcare providers must navigate in order to be able to prescribe buprenorphine - a form of medication assisted treatment (MAT). Research has shown that MAT is the most effective means of treating opioid disorders and maintaining long-term recovery yet, only one in five individuals with opioid use disorder are able to access buprenorphine. The MAT Act has bipartisan support in both the U.S. House and Senate.

### Moving People to Action

- March 2021** Hosted a teach-in on the History of the War on Drugs with over 150 attendees from across the country; co-hosted the Harm Reduction Week of Action with National Harm Reduction Coalition engaging 700 attendees with over 150 actions taken in support of the MAT Act.
- June 2021** Marked the 50th anniversary of the War on Drugs with a social media week of action reach of over 7,000 Facebook views and over 16,500 twitter impressions.
- July 2021** Participated in a coalitional MAT Act Day of Action by moving over 1,000 contacts to the office of Congressman Frank Pallone (D, NJ06), who chairs the Energy and Commerce Committee, to push him to call the MAT Act for markup. Across the broader MAT Act Coalition space over 7,000 contacts were made to Congress.
- Sept. 2021** Came together in Washington, D.C. for a hybrid MAT Act Refresher and Text Bank with 20 people together in-person and 31 people joining us from coast to coast on Zoom. The first half focused on building relationships and updating on the MAT Act status while the second half was a text bank into the district of our key Congressional target: Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman Frank Pallone. In this short 45-minute text bank, we reached over 47,000 constituents, received over 3,000 replies and moved 40 people to take action to contact Congressman Pallone. We also did a number of lobby visits to Members of Congress which brought on new sponsors to the MAT Act. All this was possible with just a 12 person delegation from the Overdose Crisis Cohort. For almost half of them, this was their first time coming to D.C. and the first time that our cohort has gotten together for an in-person gathering since December 2019.

## Engaging Allies

We worked throughout the year with our key allies at **Drug Policy Alliance**, **National Harm Reduction Coalition** and **VOCAL-NY**. Together we moved two significant coalition letters to the new administration in early 2021 including our platform letter to ONDCP signed by 212 organizations and covered in The Washington Post's Health 202 column. Additionally we moved 192 organizations in less than 48 hours to sign onto a letter to President Biden regarding roll back of MAT Access which resulted in new practice guidelines being released by the Administration to remove some barriers to MAT access.

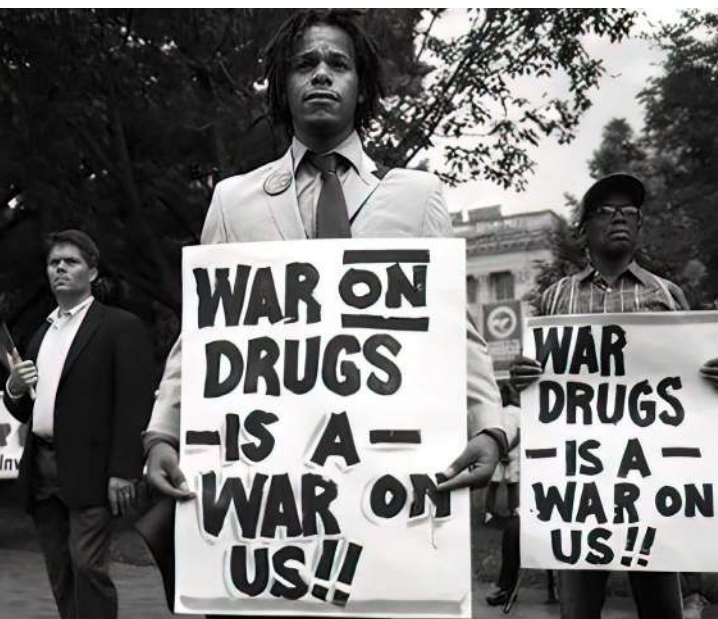


## Winning Policy Victories

- **VOCAL-NY** succeeded in decriminalizing syringe access, establishing Medication-Assisted Treatment programs in all New York State's prisons and jails, and the opening of the nation's first supervised drug-injection site in New York City.
- The **New Jersey Organizing Project** successfully advocated to expand authorization so any person or entity can obtain and administer naloxone, require health insurers to cover this cost, and to allow first responders to administer buprenorphine, a form of medication assisted treatment that is the gold-standard of care for those struggling with opioid use disorder.
- **Rights & Democracy Vermont** won the decriminalization of buprenorphine.
- **Maine People's Alliance** won the decriminalization of syringes.
- Got "Harm Reduction" language added into Medicare for All which was introduced in March 2021.







## Creating Change in the Narrative Landscape

- Created audiograms to educate the general public on our two core issue campaigns: [Passing the MAT Act](#) & [Stopping the Classwide Scheduling of Fentanyl Analogues](#)
- Released a three-part War on Drugs video series as a political education tool:
  - [Part 1: The Misconceptions about Drug Use](#)
  - [Part 2: How We Got Here](#)
  - [Part 3: Solutions](#)
- Authored and successfully published a number of OpEds:
  - [50 Years Later, End the Drug War](#) published in *OtherWords.org* and picked up by 20+ outlets
  - [The Fatal Fanaticism of Drug Prohibition](#) in *Sojourners*
  - [It's Time to End the Drug War](#) in *Athens News*
  - [The War on Drugs is a War on People Like Me](#) in *Our Future*
  - [Vermont Wants to Heal the Overdose Crisis, Do You?](#) in *Our Future*
  - [Sen. Portman, Save Ohio Lives by Supporting the MAT and STOP Fentanyl Acts](#) in *Cleveland.com*
  - [This Bill Could Reduce Overdose Deaths. Why is Congress Sitting on It?](#) in *NJ.com*

## Building the Bigger "We"

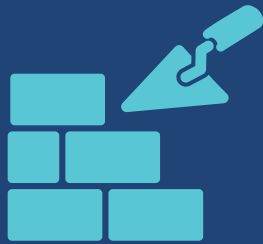
In 2019-2020, the Overdose Crisis Cohort engaged in a polling and messaging project to identify the best messages to build the bigger "we" and bring more people into our fight. In 2021, we dug into implementing the core messaging guidance to advance our issues and strengthen our base of power. The messaging is targeted at building across race and class divides to bring together people who are experiencing similar challenges though are often encouraged to fight against each other, rather than focus on the true power players that are causing rising overdose rates.

Race/Class Narrative 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

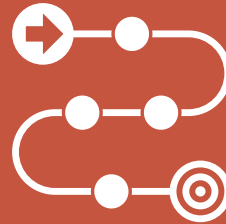
## WHERE WE ARE FOCUSED IN 2022

**Organizing revival:  
building the bigger we,  
leadership development**



1

**Long-term planning  
and visioning**



2

**Winning policy victories  
at the local, state and  
federal level**



3

**Narrative  
campaigning**



4

**PEOPLE'S |  
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