



ISSUE

Reduce substance use disorder morbidity and mortality

MMA Position

The MMA supports efforts to examine substance use, abuse, misuse, and overdose through a public health lens. This includes: 1) the expansion of medicated assisted treatment (MAT) in jails, prisons, and sober homes; 2) efforts to strengthen Minnesota's Good Samaritan law; and 3) the development and implementation of overdose prevention centers in Minnesota.

Background

According to the American Society of Addiction Medicine, "addiction is a treatable, chronic medical disease involving complex interactions among brain circuits, genetics, the environment, and an individual's life experiences." As a society, we have not treated addiction as a disease. Instead, the drug policies we have put in place have emphasized a punitive response to substance abuse and addiction – when a rehabilitative response would be more effective.

Minnesota, and the rest of the nation, continue to be in a drug overdose and death epidemic – an epidemic that shows no signs of improving. The toll this epidemic has taken is measurable in terms of death and illness, as well as economic and societal costs. According to the AMA, "more than 106,000 drug overdose deaths were reported in the United States between May 2022 and May 2023." According to preliminary data from the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH), "in 2022, on average, three Minnesotans died each day from a drug overdose with the total number of drug overdose deaths holding steady from the previous year." Furthermore, the MDH data demonstrated that "drug overdose deaths continue to be dominated by synthetic opioids (e.g., fentanyl), psychostimulants (e.g., methamphetamine), and cocaine."

Increasing access to harm reduction services is one strategy that can be used to address this epidemic. According to the National Harm Reduction Coalition, "harm reduction is a set of practical strategies and ideas aimed at reducing negative consequences associated with drug use." To effectively address substance use morbidity and mortality, we need to shift the focus to view drug use, abuse and misuse not through a criminal lens – but rather, through a public health lens.

Addiction is a disease, and moving past the stigma is what is needed to ensure that individuals are met where they are at, and afforded the opportunity to seek the care necessary to address a disease that is too often ignored.

Talking Points

- Substance use disorder is a treatable, chronic medical disease and must be treated as such.
- All people who use drugs are deserving of care and respect by the medical community and society at-large, but the stigma associated with illicit drug use leads to discriminatory policies that further harm people who use them.
- Drug checking, or the ability of people who use drugs to measure the presence and/or quantity of dangerous adulterants in substances they intend to consume, is a crucial tool for reducing drug-related injury and overdose associated with consuming unknown substances.
- Good Samaritan laws, or laws that offer legal protections for people experiencing or witnessing an overdose and who seek medical attention, are crucial tools for preventing overdose deaths.
- Overdose prevention centers (i.e., supervised injection sites, drug consumption rooms), or facilities that allow people who use drugs to use previously obtained substances under the supervision of healthcare professionals, are powerful tools for reducing drug-related overdose morbidity and mortality.