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The New York State Harm Reduction Association Applauds American Rescue Plan Appropriations Toward Harm Reduction Services, A Historic First

The New York State Harm Reduction Association (NYSHRA) is pleased that Congress, under the Biden-Harris administration, will be providing “\$30,000,000 in community-based funding for local Substance Use Disorder services like syringe services programs and other harm reduction interventions” through the American Rescue Plan. This legislation marks the first time in history that Congress has appropriated a funding stream specifically for Harm Reduction, the phrase “Harm Reduction” has been used in an official Office of National Drug Control Policy press release, and community organizations are explicitly eligible for federal funding.

According to the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), these funds will be administered through the HHS Secretary and awarded to local governments, community-based nonprofits, and health organizations. The funds can be used for 1) preventing and controlling the spread of infectious diseases and the consequences of such diseases for individuals with Substance Use Disorder; 2) distributing opioid overdose reversal medication to individuals at risk of overdose; 3) educating and counseling individuals at risk for Substance Use Disorders and overdose; and 4) encouraging at-risk individuals to “take steps to reduce the negative personal and public health impacts of substance use or misuse.”

NYSHRA is thrilled to see a document that details federal funding with a Harm Reduction line in its budget, as this is both a significant sign of progress and recognition of the 40+ years of toil by Harm Reductionists nationwide. Having said that, we would be remiss if we did not note that \$30 million in a \$4 billion budget for substance use is less than 1% and does not begin to address the level of need for Harm Reduction services nationally. Harm Reduction services are proven to prevent HIV, Hepatitis C, and heart and skin infections and save millions of healthcare dollars. They provide low-threshold healthcare and care management, and they serve as an entry point to substance use treatment for many.

The increase in overdose deaths in 2020 underscores the urgent need to examine the effectiveness of our current methods for managing substance use and whether we should continue to fund them. It is clear that enforcement has failed to stem both the supply of substances available and the number of overdose deaths. Prevention efforts remain mired in the rhetoric and approaches of the 1980s and lack credibility with their target audiences. Treatment might yet be effective if governments and providers embrace the research on using medications to assist people with recovery and acknowledge how behavior change realistically occurs. While we wait for these systems to grow and evolve, Harm Reduction will be there to meet those who need help wherever they fall in the continuum of substance use. Harm Reduction has no barriers to care and offers love, compassion, and help in the moment.

For more information, please visit www.nyshra.org.

About NYSHRA—*The mission of NYSHRA is to introduce and promote Harm Reduction throughout all of New York State as a scientifically based treatment appropriate for Substance Use Disorder, as well as a lifestyle approach to people who use substances. NYSHRA fulfills this mission on behalf of clinical and other providers, and the consumers they serve, through public policy and advocacy, public awareness, clinical education, and research dissemination.*