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## R SHEET ON GENERAL HARM REDUCTION

February 2019

### BACKGROUND

**T**raditionally, risky behaviors have been discouraged using an abstinence-only approach. However, research has shown that these approaches are largely ineffective on a population level.

Given the relative failure of abstinence-only approaches, harm reduction strategies have emerged as more effective alternatives to mitigate the dangers associated with such behaviors.

The primary principle of harm reduction is to “meet users where they are,” rather than to demand immediate cessation. Based on this principle, individuals engaging in risky behavior are encouraged to use safer techniques and modify behaviors, which may ultimately be pathways to abstinence or cessation.

In the 1980s, harm reduction practices emerged in the United States in response to the rise of HIV. Accordingly, sterile syringe distributions and exchanges were the first harm reduction strategies employed by grassroots organizers, and they significantly reduced the transmission of HIV even at the height of the epidemic.

### CURRENT DEBATE

Today, smoking, sexual health, and opioid or intravenous drug use are the most common areas where harm reduction approaches can be applied.

While specific debates surrounding harm reduction are dependent upon the risky behavior in question, those against its implementation generally argue that the use of harm reduction techniques tacitly condones risky behaviors; that harm reduction innovation may act as a gateway; that harm reduction programs may negatively affect populations that don't engage in risky behaviors; or that limited funding is better used on prevention.

However, there is much evidence to show that those who utilize harm reduction programs benefit from improved health outcomes and have higher rates of treatment

### SUMMARY

- American lawmakers have traditionally discouraged risky behaviors with abstinence-only approaches.
- These approaches have proven largely ineffective on a population level.
- Harm reduction approaches are more successful in that they are individually centered and aim to “meet people where they are.”
- Harm reduction does not ignore or minimize the risks associated with certain behaviors.
- Existing harm reduction programs have been proven to decrease infectious disease transmissions, reduce smoking rates and improve public health outcomes.
- Lawmakers should look to harm reduction as an important tool to address public health crises.

initiation without increasing risky behaviors on a population level.

### ACTION ITEMS

Sensible harm reduction policies are unique to each field but there are some broad actions that can increase the proliferation of these critical mitigation strategies.

First, the government should allow and encourage innovation, provide clear and consistent guidelines regarding product development and regulation, and deliver fact-based health information.

It is also critical that Congress ensures our regulatory agencies are upholding their duties and acting in the best interests of the population.

State and municipal funding to support harm reduction programs is not only a humanitarian goal but is also cost-effective for taxpayers. For example, in 2008, Washington

D.C. allocated \$650,000 to improve public health resources for intravenous drug users, including improved syringe access. Over the next two years estimates suggest that at least 120 cases of HIV were averted, which saved the city \$44 Million in healthcare costs alone.

Finally, to simply speak openly about the potential improvements to individual and community-wide quality of life is a harm reduction measure that requires no legislative action or monetary resources.

## CONCLUSION

It is important to recognize that harm reduction strategies do not minimize or ignore the risks associated with certain behaviors. Instead, they address the reality of adult behavior patterns rather than imagine a world where such behaviors don't exist.

Currently, leaders are often forced to choose between funding primary prevention efforts or funding measures that could reduce harm to people with established risky behaviors. Far too often prevention efforts automatically win out.

However, it has been proven that harm reduction principles can more effectively reduce the dangers to individuals' health and the cost to society at large. As such, lawmakers should consider them an important tool for improving public health outcomes.

## CONTACT US

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