



Report: OCAAR's Stance on Drug Policy Reform

Introduction

Ohio Citizen Advocates for Addiction Recovery (OCAAR) is a leading organization dedicated to ensuring equity for individuals seeking and in recovery from substance use disorders across Ohio. Guided by the philosophy that recovery is a human right, OCAAR advocates for policies that promote dignity, equity, and opportunity rather than punishment. This report outlines OCAAR's stance on drug policy reform, focusing on its opposition to Ohio House Bill 88 (HB 88) and its broader vision for effective, equitable solutions.

OCAAR's Philosophy on Drug Policy Reform

OCAAR firmly believes that recovery from substance use disorders should be treated as a human right. The organization opposes punitive approaches to drug policy, advocating instead for strategies that prioritize prevention, harm reduction, treatment, and recovery support services. OCAAR emphasizes the importance of centering lived experiences in policymaking to ensure that reforms address the real needs of individuals affected by substance use disorders.

Opposition to Ohio House Bill 88

House Bill 88 proposes expanding criminal penalties for drug possession, particularly for fentanyl-related compounds, and removes the requirement that individuals knowingly possess drugs containing fentanyl. While the bill aims to reduce overdose deaths, OCAAR argues that it perpetuates the failed "war on drugs" policies and undermines recovery efforts. We oppose HB 88 for the following reasons:

1. Criminalization of Addiction:

- HB 88 increases penalties for individuals who may be unaware of the presence of fentanyl in substances they possess, effectively criminalizing addiction rather than addressing trafficking.
- The bill removes judicial discretion for treatment or diversion programs, reversing progress made through recovery courts and specialized dockets.



2. Economic Inefficiency:

- The Ohio Legislative Service Commission estimates that HB 88 would cost over \$60 million annually and require 1,500+ additional prison beds.
- Decades of research demonstrate that longer sentences do not reduce drug use, crime, or overdose deaths, making the bill an ineffective use of resources.

3. Exacerbation of Inequities:

- Black, rural, and low-income Ohioans already face disproportionate arrests and sentencing. HB 88 would deepen these inequities within the justice system.
- Resources spent on incarceration could be better allocated to treatment, prevention, and recovery housing.

4. Availability of Better Solutions:

- Proven strategies such as prevention, early intervention, medication-assisted treatment (MAT), and peer recovery supports have been shown to reduce overdose deaths and recidivism.
- Recovery Support Services, which connect individuals to housing, employment, and ongoing care, are more effective in promoting long-term recovery.
- Ohio already has strong fentanyl laws (SB 1, 2018), and the focus should be on expanding services rather than increasing penalties.

OCAAR's Advocacy Message

OCAAR's advocacy message is clear: "Ohio cannot arrest its way out of addiction. HB 88 will fill prisons, not treatment centers. True safety and recovery come from investing in people—not punishment." The organization calls for a shift in focus from punitive measures to community-based solutions that address the root causes of addiction and support recovery.



Recommendations for Drug Policy Reform

OCAAR advocates for the following actions to promote effective and equitable drug policy reform:

- **Reject HB 88:** Urge legislators to vote against the bill and prevent the expansion of punitive measures.
- **Invest in Alternatives:** Allocate funding to community-based treatment, prevention, and recovery support services.
- **Center Lived Experience:** Involve individuals with lived experience in substance use recovery in policymaking and criminal justice reform efforts.
- **Expand Proven Services:** Increase access to medication-assisted treatment (MAT), peer recovery supports, and recovery housing to reduce overdose deaths and recidivism.

Conclusion

OCAAR's stance on drug policy reform is rooted in the belief that addiction should be treated as a public health issue rather than a criminal one. By opposing HB 88 and advocating for evidence-based solutions, OCAAR seeks to create an Ohio that safeguards the human rights of individuals with substance use disorders and invests in their recovery. The organization calls on policymakers, advocates, and community members to join in promoting dignity, equity, and opportunity for all Ohioans.

For more information or to support OCAAR's advocacy efforts, contact:

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