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Health and Advocacy Organizations Urge the Texas Legislature to Implement Effective Strategies to Address Substance Use Disorder

AUSTIN, TX – A coalition of health and advocacy groups have jointly developed [recommendations](#) to address substance use disorder in Texas. The Substance Use Disorder Coalition of Texas (SUDC) is comprised of more than 15 organizations with expertise in health systems, prevention of drug and alcohol abuse, recovery and peer-based recovery supports and services, harm reduction, child protection, criminal justice, mental health, and treatment. The recommendations support the work of the House Select Committee on Opioids & Substance Abuse, a special legislative committee appointed by the Speaker of the Texas House of Representatives to study the impact of substance use disorder on families and communities.

The coalition finds that substance use disorders, when not addressed, have a devastating impact on families and communities and are responsible for enormous costs in the state budget related to health care, public safety, criminal justice, homelessness, domestic violence, foster care, and social welfare programs. SUDC organizations highlight various warning signs showing that substance use disorder is at a crisis point in Texas: accelerating rates of overdose deaths, communities that are ill-equipped to meet prevention and treatment needs, child abuse/neglect and maternal mortality, and overcrowded jails.

The coalition calls on the Legislature to invest in the future lives of young Texans by ensuring that their parents have access to substance abuse services that will facilitate their recovery. According to Will Francis with the National Association of Social Workers, “Substance abuse prevents too many parents from being the best possible caregivers they can be to their children. Texas needs to invest in a variety of recovery services that strengthen a parent’s ability to confront and overcome their addiction issues, while still supporting the bond between a parent and a child. With treatment and the ongoing support of a community that offers hope and help, a parent can develop the skills necessary to achieve both sobriety and a stronger bond with their kids.”

The SUDC also recommends increased access to appropriate treatment services and community recovery supports. “Now, more than ever, Texas needs to support and increase access to peer-based recovery supports and services, and expand the number of Recovery Community Organizations,” says Robin Peyson, Executive Director of Communities for Recovery. “These community-based recovery centers offer an effective, low-cost solution to providing access in small metropolitan and rural communities, and help individuals in or seeking recovery to achieve long-term sobriety.”

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The SUDC further advocates for improved coordination between mental health and substance use systems, recognizing that an approach that divides these conditions into different silos yields worse outcomes. According to Greg Hansch, Public Policy Director of NAMI Texas, “All too often, care for substance use disorders is not coordinated to address the mental health conditions that people may also experience. The opposite of that is also true: when people receive mental health care, it is common for there not to be substance use disorder care available as part of that. Knowing the relationship between substance use disorders and mental health conditions, the Legislature should ensure that integrated mental health and substance use disorder care is available for all who need it.”

The organizations’ recommendations also highlight the need for a criminal justice response that supports rather than overrides a public health response to substance use. Doug Smith, Senior Policy Analyst for the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition, says, “People with substance use disorder are vastly overrepresented in the criminal justice system, often because of the lack of public health support available to those in need. We know that lack of resources is the main reason counties are unable to divert more people out of the justice system, so we end up squandering money on jails and prisons, only increasing the risk of overdose.”

The SUDC recommends that the Legislature provide incentive funds to counties to reduce prison or jail commitments – resources that can be used to augment community supports such as sober living environments, peer coaching, and treatment. The coalition recommends a graduated sentencing model for low-level offenses like drug possession, a measure that will save money that can be used to support the incentive funding model.

Collectively, the SUDC’s recommendations aim toward a public health response to substance use disorder, shifting away from an acute care model (active but short-term treatment) and towards a system that insures, treats, and evaluates substance use disorder like other chronic illnesses. This will invariably entail preventing and treating substance use disorders, but must also include evidence-based supports such as medication assisted treatment, peer support, and recovery housing. According to Jason Howell of Recovery People, “Access to quality recovery housing is vital because most with a substance use disorder return from treatment or institutions to living environments that enable addictive lifestyles.”

For a copy of the recommendations, [click here](#).

The recommendations are being released in advance of the [Select Committee on Opioids and Substance Abuse hearing](#) on August 8, 2018, which will include the opportunity for public testimony. The hearing is scheduled for 9:00am in the Capitol Extension, Room E2.012. SUDC members will testify at the hearing.

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Contact Information for Specific Topics Related to Substance Use Disorders

Alcohol and Drug Prevention – Youth and adults

- Cynthia Humphrey, Executive Director, Association of Substance Abuse Programs, chumphrey@asaptexas.org

Keeping Families Together – Child wellbeing, maternal health, and parental substance use

- Adriana Kohler, Senior Health Policy Associate, Texans Care for Children, akohler@txchildren.org
- Will Francis, Government Relations Director, National Association of Social Workers/Texas Chapter, wfrancis.naswtx@socialworkers.org

Access to Treatment Services and Community Recovery Supports

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 - Ben Bass, Executive Director, Recovery Alliance of El Paso, bbass@recoveryalliance.net
 - Jason Howell, Recovery People, jason.howell@recoverypeople.org
 - Carl Hunter, Peer Policy Fellow, Recovery People, carl.hunter@recoverypeople.org
 - Kimber Falkinburg, Founder and Executive Director, Spread Hope Like Fire, kimber@spreadhopelikefire.com
 - Robin Peyson, Executive Director, Communities for Recovery, rpeyson@cforr.org

Treatment for Co-Occurring Conditions

- Greg Hansch, Public Policy Director, National Alliance on Mental Illness Texas, publicpolicy.director@namitexas.org
- Cynthia Humphrey, Executive Director, Association of Substance Abuse Programs, chumphrey@asaptexas.org

Treatment Approaches to Prevent or Reduce Justice System Involvement

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- Alycia Welch, Director of Policy and Planning, Lone Star Justice Alliance, awelch@lsja.org

Public Health and Safety

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