

Dear Commissioners,

I am writing to you on behalf of over 40 organizations as part of the Harm Reduction and Recovery Coalition. As a network of treatment providers, frontline service workers, public health advocates and criminal justice experts, we are writing to shed light on the unique needs of a population at [heightened risk of death](#) due to COVID-19. As the COVID-19 pandemic surges, people with substance use disorders (SUD) have garnered little attention in the national conversation despite their increased risk of morbidity and mortality.

Opioids, suppress respiratory function on their own. Opioid or stimulant use combined with any other comorbid condition increases the likelihood of death. Many opioid and stimulant users also use tobacco, which, according to the international literature, [increases mortality from Covid-19](#). Opioid and stimulant users also face incarceration and homelessness, which exponentially increases their likelihood of contracting and dying from COVID-19.

The opioid overdose crisis has caused significant and unprecedented mortality rates, far exceeding deaths from vehicle accidents, HIV/AIDS and gun violence, making drug overdose the [number one cause of accidental death](#) among adults under 50 in the United States. In 2018, Illinois lost [2,167 individuals](#) to fatal drug overdoses with *African Americans dying at nearly double the rate of Whites*. The addition of a viral pandemic on top of an overdose crisis will exponentially increase the number of deaths.

For these reasons, we are calling for a comprehensive strategy to fully address prevention and support services for people with SUD within Jails and the community. Given this extraordinary time, we ask that the following services and policy recommendations be implemented with the utmost urgency to prevent the spread of COVID-19 among individuals with SUD and the broader community. The following comprise our recommendations for the criminal justice system and releasing people from the criminal justice system:

1. **Continue to Release Persons at Risk of Morbidity and Mortality from Jails.** Many people incarcerated for drug-related crimes or other property-related crimes because of an untreated SUD do not pose a risk to public safety. [We join public health and criminal justice reform experts](#) calling for the immediate release of as many people as safely possible who are currently incarcerated or detained throughout the state of IL including the Cook County Jail, [to curb the transmission of COVID-19](#). These facilities [provide the foundation for mass transmission](#) - increasing the likelihood of detained or incarcerated individuals with substance use disorders contracting the virus as well as putting staff, and the broader community at increased risk of morbidity and mortality from COVID-19. *This situation in the jail is now dire.*
2. **Increase Access to Opioid Agonist Treatment in the Community and in the Criminal Justice System.** Opioid agonist therapy (OAT) such as methadone and buprenorphine are the “gold standard,” [evidence-based treatment](#) for opioid use disorders. These medicines reduce cravings, stabilize people struggling with chaotic use, and are the only drug therapeutics that protect against overdose and are considered an essential medicine by the world health organization.
3. **Increase Access to Low-Barrier Housing for Individuals with SUD**  
Individuals with SUD who are unhoused experience an [increased risk of overdose](#).
  - Promote a [housing first model](#) that prioritizes keeping people housed regardless of substance use. Low-barrier shelter also upholds the safety and security of persons experiencing [intimate partner violence](#) (IPV).

- 4. Prioritize Access to Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services (e.g. [harm reduction services](#)), including [Syringe Service Programs \(SSPs\)](#) and [Naloxone Distribution](#).** SSPs originated out of viral infection prevention. Prioritizing and bolstering these critical services during this time helps to curb the spread of COVID-19 by equipping service users, many of whom are already living with chronic viral conditions, with the supplies they need to reduce infection risks thereby limiting travel and promoting social distancing.

It is of utmost concern that we work to ensure that people with SUDs are not left out of the conversation and prioritized for release from jails as these individuals are at high risk of death as Covid-19 spreads through the Jail and the community.

Sincerely,

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