

U.S. Sen. Baldwin: Calls for continued support for opioid overdose prevention and harm reduction in COVID-19 recovery efforts

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Washington, D.C. – U.S. Senators Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) and Tina Smith (D-MN) sent a letter to Dr. Mariam Delphin-Rittmon, the Assistant Secretary for Mental Health and Substance Abuse in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, asking the Biden Administration to continue their strong commitment to addressing the opioid and substance use disorder (SUD) epidemic, which has significantly worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to urging for additional support for SUD prevention, treatment and recovery efforts, they called for elevating the role of harm reduction and overdose prevention, including through syringe services and increased access to naloxone, the opioid overdose reversal medication.

In the letter, the senators highlighted that the COVID-19 pandemic has, **“dramatically exacerbated the opioid and SUD epidemic in this country, and the needs of patients and communities are clear. The nature of the public health emergency has increased social isolation and stress while decreasing access to treatment, supportive services and harm reduction, with significant repercussions for individuals facing addiction.”**

The ongoing opioid epidemic has significantly worsened during the pandemic, with reported overdoses and deaths spiking to historic levels over the past year. In 2020,

the United States experienced 92,500 overdose deaths, up from 71,000 in 2019. Overdose deaths continue to rise in 2021.

They continued later in the letter: **“Given the scale of need at this moment, we must take an all-of-the-above, evidence-based approach to save lives. It has never been more important to follow the guidance of public health and addiction experts in adopting harm reduction strategies on a wide scale, including overdose prevention education, naloxone access initiatives, and syringe services programs (SSPs). These evidence-based approaches that focus on ‘meeting individuals where they are’ are a proven, effective tool to reduce medical emergencies, drug overdoses and deaths.”**

The letter also urged the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to quickly allocate \$30 million in funding for SUD harm reduction efforts that was provided by Congress in the American Rescue Plan Act (P.L. 117- 2), and called for input from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) so these funds can be distributed expeditiously to communities with the greatest need. They also requested that SAMHSA investigate and quickly take action in response to nationwide shortages of naloxone, which is a critical tool to reverse opioid overdoses.

The letter also has the support of leading Wisconsin and national public health groups.

“Senator Baldwin’s continued advocacy for treatment, recovery supports and harm reduction strategies is so important right now. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, thousands of Americans have struggled with substance use and mental health issues due to lost connections and barriers to support,” **said Jesse Heffernan, RCP, of Appleton, Wisconsin, a recovery coach and person in recovery.** “Harm Reduction is the umbrella for all pathways to and of recovery. Naloxone and syringe exchange programs are data driven, compassionate approaches to public health similar to CPR training and AED access. We look forward to the quick and targeted funding for Harm Reduction training, materials and strategies to help our communities save lives and bridge gaps in access to care.”

“Harm reduction based programs and services have a profound, positive impact on the lives of individuals impacted by the ongoing opioid epidemic. From preventing

the transmission of hepatitis and HIV to preventing needless overdoses, every day these programs save lives in communities across the nation,” **said Bill Keeton, Chief Advocacy Officer of Vivent Health, formerly the AIDS Resource Center of Wisconsin.** “The need for these programs has never been greater and Vivent Health applauds Senator Baldwin for her unyielding commitment to supporting these critical efforts while calling on SAMHSA to elevate harm reduction in their response.”

“The COVID-19 pandemic has not only accelerated the already catastrophic loss of life due to the overdose crisis, but exposed the gross racial disparities in our nation’s response to people living with substance use disorder — many of whom are vulnerable to HIV,” **said Jesse Milan, Jr., President & CEO of AIDS United.** “It is essential that SAMHSA work with CDC and national harm reduction focused organizations to support syringe services programs and address rising overdose rates—especially in BIPOC communities — with evidence based, culturally competent care.”

“Our nation suffered nearly 100,000 overdose deaths in 2020 and the death toll continues to rise in 2021. Like COVID-19, this overdose crisis should be treated as a public health emergency warranting an urgent response,” **said Grant Smith, Deputy Director, Office of National Affairs, Drug Policy Alliance.** “Senators Tammy Baldwin and Tina Smith appropriately urge the White House, HHS, and SAMHSA to increase its rapid response to this crisis and to include as a high priority in that response the expansion of life saving, effective, and evidence-based harm reduction interventions, such as syringe services programs and the wide distribution of naloxone to prevent drug overdose. The U.S. must respond more robustly now to save lives.”

Full text of the letter can be found [here](#) and below.

An online version of this release is available [here](#).