

Commentary

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National Drug Control Strategy Sets a New Course for U.S. Drug Policy

The White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) recently released the 2010 National Drug Control Strategy. The Strategy reflects an important, new direction for drug policy in the United States taken by the Obama Administration and ONDCP Director R. Gil Kerlikowske. Focused on community-based prevention, treatment, and law enforcement, the Strategy outlines ambitious plans to improve both public health and public safety.

The Strategy identifies preventing drugged driving as a new national priority on the same scale as preventing drunk driving. Proposed actions include encouraging states to adopt *per se* legislation, expand drugged driving research efforts, improve drugged driving prevention and education, train law enforcement to identify drugged drivers, and develop standardized procedures for drug-testing laboratories to accurately detect the presence of drugs. *Per se* drugged driving laws make it a criminal offense to operate a vehicle with any detectable level of illegal drugs in a driver's body, the standard used successfully for 12 million commercial drivers in the U.S. for more than two decades. Development of data systems to assess rates of drugged driving will enhance both education and prevention and provide ways to assess the success of these new efforts over time.

The National Strategy is committed to protecting a balance of the medical use of prescription drugs while preventing their misuse. ONDCP endorses specific prevention actions including increasing physician and patient education, expanding and improving prescription drug monitoring programs, and increasing prescription drug disposal programs. Enforcement efforts include identifying illegal distribution centers and doctor-shopping, eliminating illegal internet pharmacies, and shutting down pain clinics that illegally distribute medications. These goals are impressive and when achieved will significantly reduce prescription drug abuse which is the fastest growing drug abuse problem in the country.

The Strategy advocates improved management of the five million criminal offenders in the community on probation and parole by focusing on reducing their illegal drug and alcohol use. Drug courts, South Dakota's 24/7 Sobriety Project and Hawaii's Opportunity Probation with Enforcement (HOPE) are three different types of programs that offer effective community management for offenders. These innovative programs should become a large and well-integrated part of the efforts to reduce drug demand in the U.S.

As the National Strategy states, "not every drug-related offender has a substance abuse problem that is best addressed by treatment or public health interventions." Programs including the pioneering 24/7 Sobriety and HOPE Probation initiatives do not mandate drug treatment but rather break the cycle of substance abuse and crime by using random drug testing linked to swift, certain, and moderate sanctions for violations including any substance use. However, they do provide treatment for offenders who choose it or who demonstrate a need for it through lack of program compliance. Drug courts are

specialized management programs providing collaborative team approaches to managing offenders with mandatory drug abuse treatment. The National Strategy supports these programs by better aligning the criminal justice system and public health, not only making community corrections work better, but also making addiction treatment work better.

The National Strategy recommends increased evidence-based prevention efforts to reduce illegal drug and alcohol use by the nation's youth. The Strategy emphasizes the fact that most alcohol and drug use begins during adolescence, and the earlier it starts, the worse the prognosis. This makes preventing substance use before it starts the foundation of demand reduction. As the Strategy says, "specific interventions – such as non-punitive, random student drug testing to identify and treat early drug use, or family-strengthening programs that aim to address communication and discipline issues among families – can only be decided at the local level. The Administration is committed to all prevention efforts being comprehensive in scope, wrapping young people in support and structure across all domains of community life."¹

The National Strategy calls for increasing collaboration at the international level to improve global drug policy. A wider use of balanced and restrictive drug policies should include both treatment and prevention coupled with strong law enforcement to reduce illegal drug use and its tragic consequences, including drug-related violence. The successful balanced and restrictive drug policy of Sweden serves as a constructive, compassionate and effective model.

IBH commends President Obama and the ONDCP team led by Director Kerlikowske for the ambitious forward-looking 2010 National Drug Control Strategy.

For more information on IBH and its priorities to reduce illegal drug use, visit www.ibhinc.org.

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¹ Office of National Drug Control Policy. (2010). National drug control strategy, 2010. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved <http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/publications/policy/ndcs10/ndcs2010.pdf>