



Seizing the Drug Policy Initiative: An Agenda for Action

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Seizing the Drug Policy Initiative

The drug lobby is winning the battle for the future of our nation's drug policy. Backed by lavish funding, a credulous media and a strong political ground game in key states across the country, the drug lobby has rolled out an ever-growing number of state-based ballot initiatives related to marijuana: decriminalization, "medical" marijuana, and outright legalization. In the process it has gained control of the U.S. drug policy narrative: the U.S. has waged a doomed "war on drugs", prohibition has failed, prisons are filled with those arrested for drug use, and removing the criminal justice system from drug policy is the path to a "tax and regulate" solution to the drug problem. This view of drug policy has become an accepted truth for most Americans despite evidence that every element of it is false.

When the media presents our views of drug policy, it does so only to "balance" the dominant narrative of the drug lobby. To many Americans we look foolish and out of touch. As a result of its control of the U.S. drug policy narrative, the drug lobby has set our agenda. We are merely reactive, responding to the headlines and the legislation it creates. Justifying current drug policies puts us on the defensive. This is not a formula for success.

Yes, we must continue to combat the drug lobby's falsehoods and deceptions. But more importantly, we can seize the initiative by setting our own national agenda for drug policy. We need to promote strong, new ideas to reduce drug use and to improve public health and safety. The future belongs to those who can inspire smarter drug policies; it does not belong to those whose message is, "stay the course."

The following narrative can become the basis for an innovative, optimistic and effective future drug policy:

The modern drug epidemic, beginning in the late 1960s, is new in the history of the world and it is continuing to evolve. The U.S. survived the explosive growth of drug use that peaked in 1979 when 14.1 percent of Americans age 12 and older used an illicit drug in the past month. Today that figure is 8.7 percent. Our drug policy was effective in the face of a virulent contagion, though 6.5 million Americans still suffer from illegal drug abuse or dependence and we have seen recent increases among youth. We need to improve and advance drug policies that can be sustained for many years to come because drugs now are a significant public health and safety problem in the U.S. and globally.

Entire populations are exposed to a wide range of drugs that are delivered in highly reinforcing ways such as through smoking, snorting and injecting. Far from being harmless as claimed by our policy opponents, drugs, including marijuana, are wreaking havoc on our streets and highways, handicapping our nation's productivity, crippling education and spreading addiction and death. Drugs are a major cause of poverty, child abuse, social disintegration and crime. The most vulnerable populations to drugs are the young, the disadvantaged and the mentally ill.

Today's drug policy challenge is to find effective, sustainable and affordable strategies to limit the illegal and nonmedical use of drugs – strategies that are compatible with modern

lifestyles, values and laws. This is not an easy challenge or one for which there are quick or simple solutions.

We can build momentum through innovation for a better drug policy future by targeting five specific problem areas:

- 1. Stop Failing School Achievement and Dropout:** We need to focus on the relationship of alcohol and drug use to academic decline, failure and dropout. Recent research demonstrates that early and persistent marijuana use results in decreased I.Q. Teenage alcohol and drug use also leads to decline in motivation, lower grades and dropout. **Action:** promote prevention, intervention and treatment to stop the hemorrhage both in high school and in post-secondary education. Engage parents through effective media and education that empowers them to take responsibility to prevent and protect their children from drug use.
- 2. Reduce Poverty:** Drug use is a significant cause of people falling into and remaining in poverty. **Action:** promote recovery, especially among the most vulnerable, through programs that effectively discourage drug use and that encourage participation in the 12-step programs of Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. Twelve-step programs are free of charge and available everywhere. Created in the United States, they reflect some of the country's most fundamental values – people working together, directly and personally, to solve their serious problems.
- 3. Reduce Criminal Recidivism:** Drug use drives high rates of criminal recidivism among the five million people on probation and parole in the U.S. **Action:** promote innovative programs that are a part of the New Paradigm, including Hawaii's HOPE Probation, South Dakota's 24/7 Sobriety Program and Drug Courts. This New Paradigm reduces drug use, reduces incarceration and reduces recidivism by closely monitoring participants through frequent random drug and alcohol testing that are linked to swift and certain, but brief, incarceration for any alcohol or other drug use.
- 4. Reduce Drugged Driving:** Drug use by drivers has become a threat to highway safety on a par with drunk driving. While reducing drugged driving has been identified as a national priority by the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, state drugged driving laws and enforcement largely have been sidetracked. The public remains unaware of this widespread problem. **Action:** promote effective state *per se* drugged driving laws backed by strong enforcement, routine drug testing and massive public education to improve highway safety, reduce illegal drug use and provide a new pathway to recovery for millions of drug abusing Americans.
- 5. Improve Treatment:** Drug abuse treatment in the U.S. must be improved. Problems such as continued drug use while in treatment, low retention, and limited short-term goals must be solved. There are better ways to help the millions of Americans with drug abuse and dependence. **Action:** as first priority, improve opioid substitution therapy (OSI) for opioid dependence so that it promotes lifelong recovery. This includes stopping nonmedical drug use through drug testing and close linkage with the 12-Step programs.

This five-part Plan of Action has been developed over the last decade by the Institute for Behavior and Health, Inc. For more than three decades IBH has been identifying and promoting new, effective and affordable ideas to reduce illegal drug use. Today the success of the drug lobby's agenda of harm reduction presents us with a unique opportunity. Every single element of that pro-drug agenda encourages drug use and increases the nation's drug problems. We must drive that point home in our arguments at the same time we promote our new agenda that reduces drug use.

It is instructive to recall our nation's drug policy history. In 1971, responding to the sudden drug epidemic, the first White House drug office "balanced" the government's drug policy which at the time focused on law enforcement. The objective of this new balanced drug policy was to reduce the demand for as well as the supply of drugs. To reduce demand, significant new funding was added for treatment, prevention and research. This balanced drug policy has enjoyed steady bipartisan support during the ensuing four decades. It remains the foundation for a revitalized drug policy and it is central to the continuation of America's global drug policy leadership.

For more information about the Institute for Behavior and Health, visit:

www.IBHinc.org

www.StopDruggedDriving.org

www.PreventTeenDrugUse.org

www.PreventionNotPunishment.org