

Treatment & Recovery

Support for a Healthy PA

Approximately 299,000 Pennsylvanians struggle with a substance use disorder (SUD).¹ The opioid epidemic has rapidly become one of the worst public health crises in Pennsylvania—and the nation. In 2020, drug overdose deaths in Pennsylvania totaled 5,067—the second highest number of overdose deaths in a single year since the opioid epidemic began in the 1990s.

Pennsylvanians of all backgrounds, incomes and races struggle with alcohol and other substance abuse disorders. And no community, whether rural or urban, is exempt from its impact. To build a safe and healthy Commonwealth for every resident, a comprehensive approach is needed to treat those who are suffering, reduce harm, and promote sustained recovery. To this end, Partnership for Better Health supports the following policies.

Strengthen Existing Substance Use Disorder Treatment Systems

Integrate medication-assisted treatment (MAT) into all levels of care.

Studies demonstrate that medication-assisted treatment (MAT)—the use of FDA-approved medication in combination with counseling and behavioral therapies—is successful in treating opioid use disorder, preventing overdose, reducing the risk of HIV or Hepatitis C, and supporting long-term recovery.² To effectively treat substance use disorder, Pennsylvania should remove barriers to offering MAT at all levels of care and make sure that all providers receive continuous education about the advantages of MAT.

Increase treatment providers trained in evidence-based practice.

Recent studies indicate that motivational techniques can improve outcomes for individuals with substance use disorder.³ When used as part of other evidence-based interventions such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), motivational interviewing (MI) can help people with SUD achieve positive long-term outcomes.⁴ Additional funding to the PA Departments of Drug and Alcohol Programs (DDAP) and Human Services (DHS) will strengthen our treatment systems and improve outcomes for people with SUD.

Expand access to treatment, especially in rural areas.

Forty-eight of Pennsylvania's 67 counties are rural. Obtaining treatment, specifically medication-assisted treatment (MAT), poses greater difficulties for individuals with a substance use disorder in rural areas, primarily due to the inadequate number of clinics and providers. We can minimize these barriers to treatment by expanding funding for current services to add additional clinics, increasing incentives to providers to serve in rural areas through student loan forgiveness programs or other benefits, and expanding funding for public transportation, including medical assistance reimbursement, in rural communities.

Expand Harm Reduction Strategies

Legalize syringe service programs across Pennsylvania.

Syringe service programs (SSP) are public health programs that help meet the health and medical needs of individuals with SUD. These programs, currently authorized only in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, provide access to clean syringes, referrals to drug treatment and other social services, HIV and Hepatitis C virus testing, naloxone, and several other services. A proven harm reduction strategy, SSPs lower the likelihood of death by overdose and decrease risk of HIV transmission. Furthermore, users of SSP programs are five times more likely to enter SUD treatment.⁵ Pennsylvania lawmakers need to amend the state's drug paraphernalia law to exempt the availability of SSPs throughout the state.

Support Sustained Recovery

Incentivize businesses to hire individuals in recovery.

Individuals in recovery from SUD may face challenges in finding steady, gainful employment due to stigma or criminal history. For individuals in recovery, a reliable income is not only necessary for supporting their families and meeting basic needs, but it also plays a vital role in their sense of inclusion, accomplishment, and productivity in the workforce. In a survey conducted by DDAP in 2019, many individuals in recovery reported that several of their unmet needs revolved around employment, including the need for job assistance and career training.⁶

Promote pardon process for past drug-related criminal convictions.

A criminal record can prevent individuals in recovery from obtaining housing, employment, the ability to volunteer or work with children, and more. Approximately 70% of individuals applying to the Pennsylvania Board of Pardons (BOP) are seeking a pardon for drug-related convictions, with 60% of applicants reporting a substance use disorder.⁷ Making the pardon process faster is crucial for supporting individuals with SUD to reintegrate into society and sustain their recovery.

¹ Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (2024). Opioid Data Dashboard. <https://www.health.pa.gov/topics/disease/Opioids/Pages/Opioids.aspx>

² Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2021). Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT). <https://www.samhsa.gov/medication-assisted-treatment>

³ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2021). Using Motivational Interviewing in Substance Use Disorder Treatment. Advisory.

⁴ Naar, S., & Safren, S.A. (2017). Motivational interviewing and CBT: Combining strategies for maximum effectiveness. Guilford.

⁵ Scotti, R. (2020). Syringe service programs [Powerpoint slides]. Pennsylvania Department of Health. <https://www.paproviders.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/SSP-Power-Point-v.2.11.20.pdf>

⁶ Pennsylvania Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs. (2020). Recovery Needs in Pennsylvania. https://www.ddap.pa.gov/Documents/Agency%20Reports/RecoveryNeedsSurveyReport_Sep_2020.pdf

⁷ Pennsylvania Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs. State Plan: 2019-2023. <https://www.ddap.pa.gov/Documents/Agency%20Reports/State%20Plan%20and%20Annual%20Reports/2019-2023%20DDAP%20State%20Plan.pdf>