**Current State of the Opioid Overdose Epidemic**

As the world continues to battle and face the devastating consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States fights yet an additional crisis, the opioid overdose epidemic. While overdose deaths were already increasing in the months preceding COVID-19, the latest numbers suggest an acceleration of overdose deaths during the pandemic.[[1]](#footnote-1) Just prior to the global health crisis, in 2019 nearly 50,000 people in the U.S. died from opioid-involved overdoses.[[2]](#footnote-2)

As of March 2021, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that 88,295 drug overdose deaths occurred in the U.S. in the 12 months ending in August 2020, 27% more than the prior 12-month period.[[3]](#footnote-3) Synthetic opioids (primarily illicitly manufactured fentanyl) appear to be the primary driver of the increases in overdose deaths while overdose deaths involving cocaine also increased by 26.5 percent.[[4]](#footnote-4)  The CDC estimates that the total "economic burden" of prescription opioid misuse alone in the U.S. is $78.5 billion a year, including the costs of healthcare, lost productivity, addiction treatment, and criminal justice involvement.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Role of Protection & Advocacy Network**

The National Disability Rights Network (NDRN) and the Protection and Advocacy (P&A) Network promote a society where people with disabilities exercise informed choices and self-determination. For over 40 years, the nationwide P&A Network has worked to improve the lives of people with disabilities by guarding against abuse; advocating for basic rights; and ensuring access and accountability in health care, education, employment, housing, transportation, voting, and within the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Collectively, the P&A Network is the largest provider of legally based advocacy services to people with disabilities in the U.S.

The devastating human loss, and impact of opioid and substance use in the U.S. has been growing at an incredible rate in recent years and is only amplified by the current COVID-19 crisis. Too many communities in the U.S., including the disability community and those impacted by substance use, face abuse, neglect, financial exploitation, a lack of quality services, and deprivation of rights.

**Access Barriers to Substance Use Recovery**

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) reports that those with disabilities encounter barriers that prevent them from attaining treatment even when the necessary funds and motivation are present.[[6]](#footnote-6) According to the American Association on Health and Disability, more than half of treatment facilities in the U.S. turn away patients due to physical barriers preventing them from accessing the care provided.[[7]](#footnote-7) The main concerns surrounding those who seek treatment and have physical disabilities is accessibility, such as a lack of braille or sign language. For those with intellectual disabilities, the issues surround unequal access to information as it is traditionally presented in treatment facilities.

Additionally, SAMHSA has stated that having a home or a stable and safe place to live is recognized as fundamental to recovery for substance use disorders.[[8]](#footnote-8) Successful recovery requires multifaceted treatment, including psychological, social, vocational, and legal support. Most people who get into and remain in treatment cease the use of drugs and criminal activity. Additionally, they are found to improve their occupational, social, and psychological functioning. As stated by the International Journal of Drug Policy, “A significant and growing body of research acknowledges stable housing as an essential component in effective treatment strategies and retention.”[[9]](#footnote-9)  Unfortunately, accessible housing can be difficult for people with disabilities to find and attain.

**Funding Needed to Protect People with Disabilities**

While P&A agencies can already provide services to people with substance use disorders, without a dedicated source of funding to address the abuse, neglect, financial exploitation, lack of access to services, and rights deprivation issues these individuals face, the ability to advocate for this population is limited. Dedicated funding would allow P&A agencies to make advocacy for individuals with substance use disorder an absolute priority in their work. Dedicated funding would also allow the P&As to hire staff that would specifically work on issues impacting people with substance use disorder. P&As will provide the necessary advocacy support to ensure access to treatment, resulting in higher rates of recovery and lower national costs.

Not being able to address these issues mean that individuals that are trying to overcome substance or opioid use remain trapped in the never-ending spiral of addiction, treatment, and relapse. Being able to connect individuals with needed services (both treatment, but also other important human services like housing, employment, education, etc.) through the P&A’s advocacy will allow individuals to break out of the cyclical trap and be fully integrated within the community again. A clear and dedicated funding stream will also allow P&As to better mitigate the health and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on people impacted by substance use disorders.

P&As have demonstrated that they are capable of leveraging funds received for needed advocacy work into millions of dollars of critical services and supports. Dedicated funding to the P&As will allow for these benefits to accrue throughout the country, positively impacting people and all of society in a magnitude greater than the funding would suggest.

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1. <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2020/p1218-overdose-deaths-covid-19.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.drugabuse.gov/drug-topics/opioids/opioid-overdose-crisis> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.commonwealthfund.org/blog/2021/spike-drug-overdose-deaths-during-covid-19-pandemic-and-policy-options-move-forward#:~:text=Opioids%20accounted%20for%20around%2075,weekly%20estimates%20of%20overdose%20deaths>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2020/p1218-overdose-deaths-covid-19.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.drugabuse.gov/drug-topics/opioids/opioid-overdose-crisis> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/pep19-02-00-002_508_022620.pdfn> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://aahd.us/abstract/physical-inaccessibility-negatively-impacts-the-treatment-participation-of-persons-with-disabilities/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/recovery> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2012-06069-001> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)