City Strategies to Support Alternatives to Arrest for People with Substance Abuse Treatment Needs

Cities can improve outcomes for young adults with substance abuse issues by combining the efforts to law enforcement and service providers to use community-based alternatives to incarceration.

Substance abuse conditions appear with high prevalence among young adults, so city action emphasizing treatment can potentially head off a lifetime of addiction.

This document highlights opportunities to improve responses to young adults who need substance abuse treatment. Two complementary publications fill out an initial set of resources – the first, an introduction to overall strategies cities can use to reduce the use of jails for young adults; the second addressing jail use reduction for young adults with mental health concerns.

The Issue and the Opportunity

Jail and the criminal justice system is an ineffective, even harmful, response to substance use among young adults. Young adults use illegal drugs more often than other age groups and get arrested on drug charges at high rates. The median age of onset for substance use conditions is 20 years, and 18 to 25 years of age is the peak age range for drug use.

Disparities exist in the enforcement of drug laws. Studies demonstrate that white youth use drugs more than African-American youth, yet police arrest black youth much more often.

Due to the opioid epidemic, the national conversation about the most appropriate
criminal justice responses to substance abuse has risen in prominence. City leaders now seek better local responses to this nationwide problem, while facing demand for services that typically outstrips available capacity. This mismatch of need and capacity often results in local jails becoming the primary provider of substance abuse services in a community. The prevalence of substance use disorders is 8.5 percent among adults overall, and 68 percent among adults in jail. Substance abuse services in jail cost more and have poorer outcomes than those provided in the community.

City leaders have the opportunity to develop policies that aid law enforcement and service provider efforts to divert young adults from jail. Vocal leadership by city leaders applying the evidence of "what works" to the actions of local law enforcement and service providers in response to substance use by young adults, especially in the context of the opioid crisis, stands to result in much better outcomes across multiple areas of core city concern.

**City Action Steps to Provide Substance Use Diversion and Reduce Jail Use**

Some key steps city leaders may take to reduce the use of jails for individuals with substance abuse treatment needs follow.

- Collaborate with non-profit service providers and county colleagues to map current substance abuse service capacity alignment with the needs of people with addiction problems.
- Dedicate public and private funding sources, including Medicaid, to community-based services.
- Support partnerships between institutions of higher education and local law enforcement to create, implement, and evaluate a substance abuse screening tool to support police decisions about arrests and referral to services.
- Align zoning, funding, and data-sharing agreements to establish or support a triage center.

**White youth use drugs more, yet police arrest black youth for drug-related offenses much more often.**
City Examples

Seattle LEAD Model Replicating Across the Nation

The Seattle Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD) program, first piloted in 2011, diverts low-level drug offenders into community treatment and services options. According to evaluations by the University of Washington and Harborview Medical Center, the program reduced recidivism and improved community relations with police. The LEAD National Support Bureau provides technical support and guidance to multiple jurisdictions across the country replicating the model.

Police Increasingly Shift to Service Referrals for Opioid Use

In 2015, the Gloucester, Massachusetts, Police Department, with the mayor’s support, instituted the Angel Program to connect people with opioid addiction to services. Under the program, anyone who is concerned about their opioid use can contact the police department, turn in any drugs or drug paraphernalia, and enter treatment immediately without fear of arrest or other reprisals. In less than a year, the program placed 1,260 people in treatment and seen a 23 percent drop in quality of life crimes. An independent nonprofit organization, Police Assisted Addiction Recovery Initiative (PAARI), supports a network of 34 other cities around the Northeast to build and maintain programs based on the Angel model.

Pre-arrest Screening Tool Supports Police Referral to Substance Abuse Treatment Services

Implemented in March 2016, the STEER program (Stop, Triage, Educate, Engage and Rehabilitate) in Montgomery County, Maryland, works to divert people with substance use issues into services before arrest. A STEER case manager is available 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week to police officers and affected individuals. Local police apply a field screening tool to divert individuals toward case management and community-based services. Early results show promising progress in treatment engagement and retention, as well as early qualitative indicators of support from line offices and treatment staff. George Mason University is providing ongoing evaluation of the program.

Triage Centers

Triage centers, which often receive support from expanded Medicaid funds, provide resource saving drop-off points for local law enforcement, immediate treatment to individuals in crisis and connection to ongoing services in the community.
Alternatives for Safe Communities highlights three common traits of strong triage centers:

- Responsive to police;
- Responsive to people walking in;
- Available by crisis line to resolve many issues over the phone;
- Rapid connections to community services to support sustained recovery.

Triage centers enable law enforcement officers to make warm handoffs to services providers in five minutes, instead of the two to three hours officers typically spend in emergency rooms with each person in crisis.

This document is made possible by the generous support of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation’s Safety and Justice Challenge to NLC’s Institute for Youth, Education, and Families.

About NLC’s Institute for Youth, Education, and Families

The National League of Cities (NLC) is dedicated to helping city leaders build better communities. The Institute for Youth, Education, and Families (YEF Institute), a special entity within NLC, helps municipal leaders take action on behalf of the children, youth, and families in their communities.

To Learn More

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