



PRESS RELEASE
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Treatment First WA and CareFirst WA Coalitions Join WA Recovery Alliance To Support the Pathways To Recovery Act

Seattle, Washington -- The Treatment First WA and CareFirst WA coalitions are pleased to join with the Washington Recovery Alliance to support Pathways To Recovery Act, a bill being introduced in the Washington State Legislature today by Representatives Lauren Davis, the bill's sponsor, and Kirsten Harris-Talley, the bill's co-sponsor. The Pathways To Recovery Act (HB 1499) proposes a new, common sense approach to improving public safety by eliminating ineffective and destructive criminal penalties for personal use and expanding proven treatment and support services for substance use disorder, which is a recognized health condition, like others that have medical, social and mental health origins.

"Substance use disorder is a treatable brain disease. Criminalizing the symptoms of this health condition compounds the very trauma and shame that fuel drug use. These individuals are deserving of compassion and connection to services. No one has fallen too far to recover, if only we give them a chance." says **Representative Davis**.

Representative Harris-Talley emphasizes, "Pathways To Recovery focuses on improving community wide safety and health by improving access to proven, evidence-based recovery support services that address the social determinants of health, including housing, education, employment pathways, community connection, peer support, and treatment."

Senator Joe Nguyen, Senate champion for the bill, notes, “Pathways To Recovery goes further by providing funding and resources for increased treatment and support services including new revenue, maximizing existing health insurance benefits and grants.”

According to the Washington State Department of Health, each day about two people die of an opioid-related overdose in Washington; thousands more struggle with addiction and are hospitalized for overdoses and drug-related health issues. In King County, half of all people who died from a drug or alcohol overdose in 2017 were younger than 46 years old, per the county’s public health department. In recent years stimulant use has been associated with more overdose deaths than opioids. The increased presence of fentanyl has increased the risk of overdose and death. No communities have been exempt, and too many families have lost loved ones and struggled alone to deal with the harm they endured due to the addiction of children, siblings, parents and friends.

Treatment First representative, Mark Cooke remarks, “The prevalence of substance use disorder in Washington has reached epidemic proportions. This crisis has impacted the entire state, disproportionately harming communities of color. Arresting our children, friends, family members, and neighbors is not working. The Pathways To Recovery Act will.”

“The Pathways To Recovery Act will bring together persons from across the state with an array of experience to design an approach to reduce barriers,” said **CareFirst representative, Malika Lamont**.

Lamont explains, “People with lived experience have had direct input on the formation of this policy. This bill also requires that impacted people, front line workers in harm reduction, the medical field, law enforcement, other areas of the criminal legal system, and recovery systems will have a real voice in shaping the way the Pathways to Recovery Act is implemented.”

“This bill is important because science tells us that addiction is a disease, not a personal choice. One of the main characteristics is continuing to do harmful things despite negative consequences. Addicted people need help and treatment because they are very lost in their disease. Criminal charges are not going to help them get well and aren’t going to help society either.” **Danielle Stenhjem, a drug and alcohol counselor in Richland, WA.**

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State Representative Lauren Davis Wa District 32: Bill Sponsor

State Representative Kirsten Harris-Talley Wa District 37, Position 2: Bill Co-Sponsor

State Senator Joe Nguyen Wa District 34: Senate Champion

Treatment First WA: Treatment First WA is a coalition of public health experts, treatment professionals, legal and law enforcement experts, elected officials, leaders of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color communities, and formerly incarcerated and directly impacted community

members. Together we are working to advocate for a public health approach that supports replacing failing drug laws with a public health approach – treatment, recovery, and education to help community members impacted by substance use disorders.

Care First WA: Care First WA is an alliance of civil rights organizations, labor groups and government partners focused on advancing racial justice, harm reduction, and common-sense public safety strategies. We have committed ourselves to advancing equitable public health approaches that create a real alternative to a punishment paradigm. Our shared mission is to replace punishment for problematic drug use with reality-based, proven public health responses, emphasizing trauma-informed care. The Care First coalition includes workers and individuals with the varied, direct experiences needed to transform this system: people who have lived with harm related to drug use, or due to criminalization of drug use.

WA Recovery Alliance: The WRA is a community-driven advocacy nonprofit, led by individuals in recovery from substance use disorders and mental health conditions, families impacted by behavioral health conditions, and community organizations. With nine regional Recovery Coalitions, we have leaders on the ground across the state. Together, we advance mental health and substance use recovery by changing public understanding and shaping pro-recovery public policy.