

# A PRESCRIPTION FOR ACTION

Local Leadership in Ending  
the Opioid Crisis



A Joint Report From

**NLC** NATIONAL  
LEAGUE  
OF CITIES



# Letter from Task Force Co-Chairs

**T**he epidemic of overdoses and deaths from the abuse of prescription painkillers and heroin has devastated countless families and communities across the country.

In August, 2016 alone – as this joint task force convened by the National Association of Counties and the National League of Cities carried on its work – news reports informed us of 174 overdoses in six days in an Ohio city; 8 overdoses in 70 minutes in a Pennsylvania county and 26 overdoses in 3.5 hours in a West Virginia city. Although news outlets often provide little more than a running tally of the epidemic, leaders at the local level experience the human costs of this public health crisis one life at a time. We confront the tragedies of this epidemic in rural counties and in urban cities, and no portion of society is immune from the devastation. Families are shattered without regard to income, race, ethnicity, gender, educational attainment or family structure.

As city and county leaders entrusted with preserving the health, safety, and vitality of our communities, it is our duty to act with urgency to break the cycles of addiction, overdose, and death that have taken hold in so many corners of this nation. To that end, the report that follows features recommended policies and programs that are designed to help local leaders address the opioid epidemic. These recommendations reflect several core convictions: that addiction is an illness; that although law enforcement is critical to an effective response to this epidemic, we cannot simply arrest our way out of a crisis of addiction; and that to stem the tide of this epidemic and combat the stigma that often accompanies it, we must build partnerships across

our communities and with our counterparts at the local, state and federal levels.

As we embrace these convictions, we recognize that they differ from those that informed our nation's response to previous drug epidemics. During the crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s, addiction was criminalized – through policies like mandatory minimum sentences and three strikes laws – resulting in mass incarceration of African-Americans and Latinos. Our communities of color continue to feel the detrimental effects of these policies. It is important that we reflect upon past policies and their impact on our communities as we formulate our response to an epidemic that threatens every community across the country. Further, although it is not in our power to change the past, we can help to undo some of the damage caused by our prior responses. First, we can expand and replicate the compassion for those struggling with addiction and the public support for diversion and treatment programs to individuals throughout the criminal justice system. Second, we can support sentencing reform legislation that would retroactively apply to individuals still serving time for non-violent drug-related convictions.

It has been said that in every crisis lies the seed of opportunity, and the opioid crisis presents an invaluable opportunity for city and county officials: an opportunity to assess the way we respond to addiction and to formulate lasting and equitable responses that promote health, safety, and opportunity for all members of our communities.



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Boone County, Kentucky  
Task Force Co-Chair



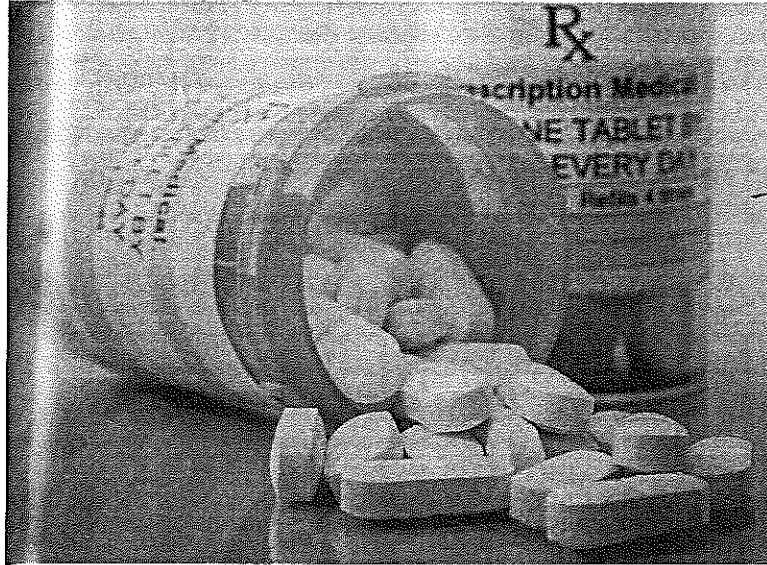
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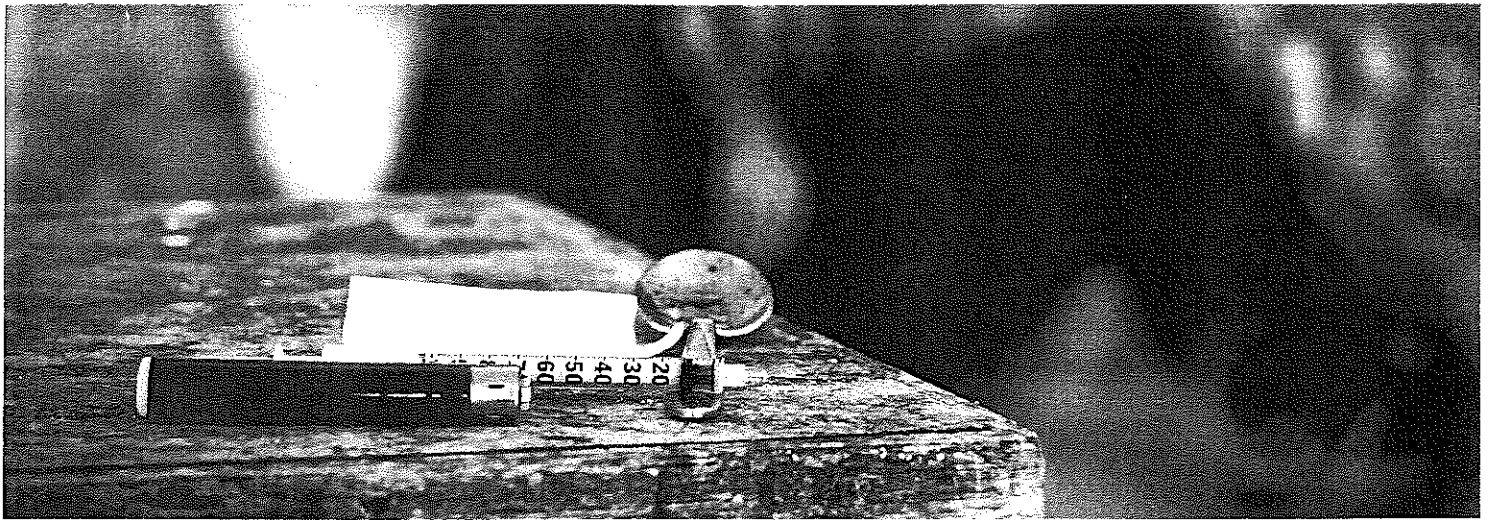
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## Responding to a Crisis

As the opioid epidemic has taken hold, city and county leaders are taking action. The number and scope of programs in place are a testament to the problem-solving skills of local officials. With both determination and imagination, local leaders are expanding prevention and treatment programs and giving more flexibility to public safety personnel who interact daily with individuals struggling with addiction. Knowing that localities cannot end this epidemic alone, these leaders are actively seeking partnerships and exploring innovative strategies that challenge old conventions about the stigma of addiction.

In early 2016, the National League of Cities and the National Association of Counties convened a joint task force to identify the local policies and practices that reduce opioid abuse and related fatalities. The task force met twice, in Washington, D.C., and in northern Kentucky. These meetings, coupled with countless conversations with local officials from across

the country, including public health directors, prosecutors, law enforcement officials and substance abuse directors, enabled the task force to produce this report and its recommendations.

The recommendations are aimed at city and county officials and are divided into four sections: 1) leadership, 2) education and prevention, 3) treatment and 4) public safety and law enforcement. Several of the recommendations are accompanied by existing local practices from cities and counties. The report also includes recommendations for state and federal officials, who are pivotal partners in local efforts to combat opioid misuse, diversion, overdose and death.

The contents of this report, in addition to expanded case studies and further resources to aid local officials in addressing the opioid crisis, are available online at <http://www.opioidaction.org/>.

## LEADING IN A CRISIS: RECOMMENDATIONS AT A GLANCE

**City and county leaders must assume roles of leadership in local efforts to reverse the trends of the opioid crisis.**

- 1. Set the tone in the local conversation on opioids.**
- 2. Convene community leaders.**
- 3. Foster regional cooperation.**
- 4. Educate and advocate to state and federal partners.**
- 5. Ensure progress for all in formulating responses to addiction.**

## Leading in a Crisis

In early 2016, the Massachusetts Municipal Association published a report for local leaders on the opioid crisis aptly titled "An Obligation to Lead." The opioid epidemic, wrote the association, "presents more than an opportunity," and is a "moral duty that all of us who are privileged to serve in local government must embrace fully."



We wholeheartedly echo those sentiments and call on city and county leaders to assume leadership roles in local efforts to reverse the trends of the opioid epidemic. It has become apparent that this epidemic can ravage any community in the nation regardless of its size or composition. In the face of such a threat, which has taken far too many lives and torn apart countless families, local officials must lead with energy, urgency and compassion. There is much to be accomplished in reversing the opioid epidemic, and few are better positioned to carry out this work.



## FOCUSING ON PREVENTION AND EDUCATION: RECOMMENDATIONS AT A GLANCE

**In order to stem the tide of the opioid epidemic, local leaders must approach prevention and education efforts with the same urgency and determination with which we work to reverse overdoses and arrest drug traffickers.**

1. Increase public awareness by all available means.
2. Reach children early, in and outside of schools.
3. Advocate for opioid training in higher education.
4. Embrace the power of data and technology.
5. Facilitate safe disposal sites and take-back days.

## Focusing on Prevention and Education

It is said that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, and this certainly applies to our efforts to fight the opioid crisis. Given the staggering number of overdoses and deaths from the opioid crisis, a heavy focus is placed, with good reason, on treatment. But that focus and urgency should not diminish our determination to prevent others from becoming addicted in the first place. Preventing individuals from abusing and becoming dependent on opioids will save lives, preserve the health and vibrancy of our communities and result in significant fiscal savings for local governments, many of which are struggling to fund addiction treatments. By approaching prevention and education efforts with the same urgency and determination with which we work to reverse overdoses and arrest drug traffickers, we can begin to create the cultural transformation needed to free our communities from the grip of the opioid crisis.

## EXPANDING TREATMENT: RECOMMENDATIONS AT A GLANCE

**Local leaders should institute policies that expand treatment for individuals struggling with opioid addiction.**

1. Make naloxone widely available.
2. Intervene to advance disease control by implementing a clean syringe program.
3. Increase availability of medication-assisted treatments.
4. Expand insurance coverage of addiction treatments.
5. Employ telemedicine solutions.

## Expanding Treatment

As society has embraced the need to medically treat addiction rather than incarcerate those with a substance use disorder convicted of a crime, the need for treatment longer than 90 days has grown and overwhelmed city, county and state governments' ability to respond. But we do know how to treat chronic illness. Nearly the same number need treatment for diabetes (29 million) as those needing treatment for substance use disorder (21 million). Yet roughly three of four diabetes patients receive treatment while only 12 percent of those with substance use disorder do, according to estimates from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Society is in short supply of drug treatment specialists to carry out medication-assisted treatments and dispense methadone, buprenorphine and naltrexone. Training programs are necessary for health professionals, and more patients should be served by doctors in private practice. Arbitrary caps should be removed on the number of patients undergoing medication-assisted treatments, at least during the present epidemic.





## REASSESSING PUBLIC SAFETY AND LAW ENFORCEMENT APPROACHES: RECOMMENDATIONS AT A GLANCE

**Law enforcement agencies should focus resources on supply-reduction and aim to divert individuals struggling with addiction from the criminal justice system to appropriate treatments.**

1. Reduce the illicit supply of opioids.
2. Consider alternatives to arrest.
3. Divert from the criminal justice system.
4. Facilitate treatment in jails.
5. Support "Ban the Box" initiatives.

## Reassessing Public Safety and Law Enforcement Approaches

Cities and counties have been fighting the "war on drugs" for nearly five decades, and unlike many other wars, this war is waged on American soil. Because this war has largely failed to differentiate between individuals struggling with addiction and traffickers who profit from addiction, communities, and in particular communities of color, have suffered extensive casualties in the war. The end result of this criminalization of addiction has been a cycle of over-incarceration that fails to address the root causes of drug abuse in our communities and costs taxpayers trillions of dollars.

In recent years, and with the onset of the opioid epidemic, local governments are reassessing and shifting approaches to drug enforcement. Although law enforcement agencies continue to carry out the important task of aggressively pursuing the drug traffickers and cartels that are flooding our communities with illicit drugs such as heroin and fentanyl, they are placing a greater focus on alternatives to arrest for those whose low-level criminal behavior is rooted in addiction.