

February 16, 2021

Mayor Goodwin, Members of the Charleston City Council, and other state and local officials:

The undersigned organizations write in support of needs-based harm reduction and in opposition to efforts to criminalize the operation of those programs in our community. We write in support of SOAR, the only needs-based harm reduction program serving our community members and loved ones in Charleston.

On Thursday, February 11, [the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention presented to the Kanawha County HIV task force data on the unprecedented public health crisis facing our community](#). The CDC, the nation's leading science-based, data-driven organization, also provided evidence-based policy recommendations—including the necessity of a needs-based approach to harm reduction.

The CDC deems the current HIV outbreak in Kanawha County “[the most concerning in the United States](#).” In 2020, Kanawha County recorded 35 HIV cases tied to intravenous drug use, only one case less than the number recorded in New York City—a city that is home to more than 8 million residents—in 2019.

For more than a year, SOAR has been building relationships and trust with people who use drugs in the Charleston-Kanawha area and are providing them with the tools and resources to keep our community safe.

SOAR distributes thousands of sturdy syringe disposal containers, collects sharps, runs the city's only 24/7 syringe clean-up text line, and has stated they are ready and willing to work with the City of Charleston on setting up syringe disposal bins. SOAR [also recently raised thousands of dollars to buy needlestick resistant gloves](#) for sanitation workers and first responders, and does its work with an all-volunteer team of social workers, physicians, public health professionals, nurses, medical students, recovery coaches, and neighbors.

The evidence is clear, and the time to act is now. This is why today we join [local businesses](#), faith leaders, and [medical professionals](#) to publicly express our support for needs-based harm reduction programs, including SOAR.

**Madam Mayor**, we ask you to join us now in stating unequivocal support for needs-based harm reduction programs, including SOAR. We have seen firsthand how conversations grounded in fear and sensationalism have resulted in disastrous public health consequences in our communities. Your leadership can set a tone for conversations around harm reduction that are based in science and compassion, not fear and stigma.

**Councilmembers**, we ask that you be deliberative, to stand with courage, and to listen to science. You can seek to criminalize the much-needed programs [that are saving lives](#), or you can use your immense policy making powers to make the capital city a more welcoming, inclusive, and healthy place for *everyone*.

**Officials at the Department of Health and Human Resources**, we ask that you immediately reconsider your denial of certification to SOAR's harm reduction program and prioritize funding for grassroots harm reduction programs across the state. Your leadership has stated that programs need local support before the DHHR will grant certification, and yet the local government looks to the state for guidance. This creates a deadly cycle which further enables HIV to spread and results in profound public health consequences, including death. *Please stop the cycle.*

Charleston is both our capital city and a community at the center of the opioid crisis. The state, and the nation, are watching our next steps. Please take this opportunity to set a gold standard for public health policy. Fear got us here: courage can get us out.

Sincerely,

American Civil Liberties Union of West Virginia

Black by God: THE WEST VIRGINIAN

Mountain State Justice, Inc.

National Association of Social Workers, West Virginia Chapter

Our Future West Virginia

Planned Parenthood South Atlantic

Rise Up West Virginia

West Virginia Center of Budget and Policy

West Virginians for Affordable Health Care

WV Citizen Action Group

WV Free

WV NOW

WV Working Families Party