

*United States of America – CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY*

**ONDCP Director Michael Botticelli  
Remarks to the Plenary Session of the  
59th UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs**

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

It is a pleasure to join you and the other distinguished delegates here today.

Addressing the global drug problem is one of the international community's greatest challenges. The consequences of substance use are experienced every day around the world – consequences that include early drug use that leads to dependency and chronic conditions, overdose, and death. Many of the challenges world leaders must address are linked to the demand for illegal drugs. And this demand fuels drug trafficking, violence, and corruption.

Given these linkages between supply and demand, it is important that the justice and health sectors collaborate on solving drug problems. This was the focus of a U.S. resolution in 2015.

Since we first gathered more than a century ago to cooperate on addressing the drug problem, we have learned – through science, research, and experience – about the importance of public health investments. We know that chronic substance use disorder is a disease of the brain – a disease that can be prevented, can be treated, and from which people can recover.

I am encouraged by the international community’s focus on public health, and we have made progress to this end. But to make further progress, we need to look inward and address the drug issues that are specific to our own countries – in fact, the international drug conventions and the 2009 Political Declaration and Plan of Action urge us to.

The U.N. treaties specifically allow member states to adjust domestic drug sentencing laws, and to create a more just and compassionate approach to addressing drugs. Punitive solutions targeting drug users do not help people recover. We must focus our law enforcement efforts on transnational criminal organizations. Long incarcerations should be reserved for drug traffickers, not those with substance use disorders.

The United States continues to work with partner nations to counter the production and trafficking of drugs, and we have also taken major strides to address our over-reliance on law enforcement; to reduce the number of new drug users; and to increase access to evidence-based drug treatment.

The United States firmly believes that investing in our people is the solution. This means investing in policies and programs not to hurt them, but to help them.

One month ago, our Government put forth a plan that balances the approach between public health and law enforcement. For the first time in history, the United States plans to similarly fund demand reduction and supply reduction efforts.

This plan specifically calls for an additional 1.1 billion dollars to expand access to treatment for people with substance use disorders. We hope other countries will also look at their funding priorities and how they can better address substance use within their borders. We will seek to partner with those countries interested in providing evidence-based prevention, treatment, and alternatives to incarceration.

We must make sure that our citizens have access to essential medicines for the relief of pain and suffering and to improve health and wellbeing. Measures to prevent diversion are important, since prescription drug misuse can be a serious problem, but such efforts should not prevent fair access to those in need.

We must seize the opportunity to make meaningful changes in each of our own countries. All of our governments have the power to substantially improve our approach to drugs, and we can do so within the treaties.

As the members of the international community create and implement new policies to address substance use disorders, it is critically important that we pursue reforms for all populations within each of our countries, including underserved populations.

There is no “one size fits all” answer to substance use disorders, because each population’s needs are unique. We must consider the needs of women, children, indigenous populations, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, those who are incarcerated in the criminal justice system, rural populations, those at risk for violent extremism, and many others to ensure our policies reflect our citizens’ needs.

The UNGASS will meet in one month in New York to address the global drug problem. This will be the first special session on drugs in nearly 20 years, and the UNGASS provides an important opportunity for countries to develop and implement science- and evidence-based drug policy reform efforts such as promoting evidence-based prevention, public health interventions including medication assisted treatment, and criminal justice reform – including alternatives to incarceration, and strengthening cooperation against transnational crime and violence prevention.

With the CND and the UNGASS, this is a moment for each of us to examine our own policies closely, to assess where we have fallen short, and to make meaningful and lasting reforms that reduce the effects of drug use on our citizens and build a healthier and more peaceful society.

Thank you for the opportunity to address you today.

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