

Seattle Overdose Task Force Calls for Decriminalization of All Drugs



BY BEN ADLIN SEPTEMBER 2, 2021



In response to the Seattle City Council’s request for policy advice on how to curb overdose deaths, a local task force is recommending the widespread decriminalization of all drugs. Psychedelics in particular, the group said, could be a promising treatment to address substance use disorders and mental health



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around controlled substances—or even legalizing and regulating them

—would “create opportunities for research and access to a regulated safe supply in a manner that is safest for everyone in the community.”

The call to decriminalize is one of five policy recommendations unveiled this week by the Overdose Emergency Innovative Recovery (OEIR) task force, convened and led by the organization **VOCAL-WA** and other community organizers. Other proposals include expanding housing, treatment and harm reduction services, as well as efforts to reduce social stigma around substance use disorders.

“Unlearning drug war propaganda of the last century will take time and patience,” the group said in a summary document. “It will take an all hands on deck effort to end the stigmatization and harm that more than a century of prohibition has caused.”

**VOCAL - Washington**
about 2 months ago

#IOAD2021 We were out at 320th and Pac Hwy S to raise awareness of the deepening overdose crisis in South King County and to remember our loved ones lost to overdose. Sadly many people stopped by in solidarity to share their own stories of loss. There was another overdose blocks away while we were out there. We have not heard if the person made it. When will we as a society be ready to stop the unnecessary and preventable poisonings occurring in our communities? VOCAL-WA has convened the Overdose Emergency Innovative Recovery (OEIR) Taskforce, we read a summary of recommendation areas that our group has identified. The full document will be released later this fall.



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The policy recommendations come roughly three months after a majority of members of the Seattle City Council signed a letter asking the task force to investigate the potential therapeutic value of psychedelics, such as ayahuasca or ibogaine, in curbing addiction. Councilmembers urged the group to “add to their work plan an examination of public policy governing psychedelic medicines.”

A more detailed list of recommendations is expected from the task force later this year, organizers said. It will then be up to the City Council to decide whether to enact policy changes in response to the group’s findings.

With respect to psychedelics, the group’s one-page summary said that “municipalities, in the state of Washington and elsewhere, that have an independent ordinance criminalizing psychedelics should repeal them, and those that don’t should direct their law enforcement agencies, local prosecutors and municipal courts to deprioritize enforcement and should publicly communicate this as municipal policy.”

State and federal officials, too, “should move to decriminalize these substances and broaden access to psychedelic therapy,” the task force recommended. “This would safeguard psychedelic treatment as a potential treatment avenue.”

The OEIR task force said there’s ample evidence that access to psychedelic therapy could help address the ongoing opioid-involved overdose crisis. “For example, psychedelic compounds have recently regained a reputation as an emerging therapy with effectiveness for substance use disorder,” it said, “and comorbid psychiatric disorders such as major depressive disorder, and post traumatic stress disorder. However, the full benefits cannot be recognized within the current prohibition based system that we have.”

“It’s not clear if the issue will be addressed with the task force’s full recommendation.

Calling the drug war a “racist and antiquated legal doctrine,” the group said that legalizing drugs would not only improve safety and reduce stigma but also be a potential moneymaker for the state. “Evidence suggests that all drugs will be safer under a legalization model and provide potentially billions of dollars in revenue to governments, like lotteries.”

But the group also cautioned that drug reform measures should preserve space for ceremonial and religious use by Indigenous groups.

document stated. “Often their ways of life are threatened by



overharvesting and Western encroachment. These cultures have utilized these compounds since time immemorial in healing and spiritual practice.”

Experts have warned for years that peyote, for example—a cactus used as an entheogen for centuries if not millennia by Indigenous peoples—is in danger of disappearing due in large part to interest from Western consumers.

One issue that is not specifically mentioned in newly released recommendations summary is the establishment of safe consumption sites (SCS). The policy, which has been suggested by Seattle advocates in years past but has not gained traction, is currently the lead issue on VOCAL-WA’s website. Last month Rhode Island became the [first state to legalize SCS](#).

It’s not clear if the issue will be addressed with the task force’s full recommendation document is released.

[Decrim Nature Seattle](#) (DNS), a local advocacy group that supports ending the prohibition of plant-based psychedelics, praised the OEIR task force’s recommendations on Wednesday.

“The growing body of research shows psychedelics can be an effective therapy for [substance use disorder] and mental health issues,” said Tatiana Quintana, DNS’s co-director and a member of the OEIR task force. “These alternative medicines are direly needed alternatives, and at DNS, we are working to ensure that plant based psychedelics are responsibly integrated into our communities and remain as accessible as possible for our residents health and wellbeing.”



Mason Marks, the director of Harvard Law School’s [Project on Psychedelics Law and Regulation](#) and a member of Oregon’s official state advisory board for that state’s psilocybin therapy program, called the recommendations “an important step for Seattle to help address its overdose and mental health crisis.”

“The City Council can now act confidently on this timely, evidence-based recommendation,” he added.

DNS is hoping to convince the City Council to pass an ordinance that would effectively decriminalize psychedelics in the city. Organizers submitted a draft ordinance May and are urging councilmembers to take action on it.

DNS is holding a symposium on the issue of decriminalizing psychedelics next week with Councilmember Andrew Lewis (D), who originally encouraged the group to submit its draft decriminalization





Like much of the rest of the country, Washington state is contemplating major changes in how it treats drug use. Earlier this year, lawmakers considered legislation that **would have removed all penalties** for possession of relatively small, “personal use” amounts of drugs and instead invested in treatment and recovery services. While that bill died in committee, lawmakers from both parties acknowledged at the time that the state’s drug control apparatus was broken.

Shortly thereafter, the state Supreme Court **overturned Washington’s felony law against drug possession completely**, sending lawmakers scrambling to replace the law. Ultimately they approved a modest reform, **reducing the state’s felony charge for drug possession to a misdemeanor** and earmarking more money for treatment.

Jurisdictions across the country are increasingly removing or reducing penalties around drug possession and consumption, especially when it comes to psychedelics. Since Denver became the first US city to decriminalize psilocybin mushrooms, in 2019, a number of states and municipalities have made similar changes to dismantle the drug war.

Most recently, a California Senate-passed bill to legalize possession of a wide range of psychedelics advanced through several Assembly committees, but **it will not move further this year** following a decision by the sponsor that more time is needed to build the case for the reform and solidify its chances of being enacted.

Meanwhile, California psychedelics activists recently **filed a petition for the 2022 ballot** to make the state the first in the nation to legalize psilocybin mushrooms for any use. **Oakland** and **Santa Cruz** have already enacted psychedelics decriminalization.

The Ann Arbor, Michigan City Council **approved the policy change last year**—and recently, local lawmakers passed a resolution to officially designate September as **Entheogenic Plants and Fungi Awareness Month**.

Other Massachusetts cities that have enacted the policy change are: **Northampton, Somerville and Cambridge**.

Activists in Denver are now pushing to expand that city’s psilocybin



The governor of Connecticut recently signed legislation recently that includes language requiring the state to carry out a [study into the therapeutic potential of psilocybin mushrooms](#).

Texas also recently enacted a bill to require the state [study the medical benefits of psychedelics for military veterans](#).

A New York lawmaker introduced a bill in June that would require the state to establish an institute to similarly [research the medical value of psychedelics](#).

In Oakland, the first city where a city council voted to broadly deprioritize criminalization of entheogenic substances, lawmakers [approved a follow-up resolution](#) in December that calls for the policy change to be adopted statewide and for local jurisdictions to be allowed to permit healing ceremonies where people could use psychedelics.

After Ann Arbor legislators passed a decriminalization resolution last year, a county prosecutor recently announced [that his office will not be pursuing charges](#) over possessing entheogenic plants and fungi —“regardless of the amount at issue.”

The Aspen, Colorado City Council [discussed the therapeutic potential of psychedelics](#) like psilocybin and proposals to decriminalize such substances at a meeting in May. But members said, as it stands, enacting a reform would be more better handled at the state level while entheogens remain strictly federally controlled.

Activists in Portland, Oregon, meanwhile, are mounting a [push to have local lawmakers pass a resolution](#) decriminalizing the cultivation, gifting and ceremonial use of a wide range of psychedelics.

In a setback for advocates, the US House of Representatives recently voted against a proposal from Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) that [would have removed a spending bill rider](#) that advocates say has restricted federal funds for research into Schedule I drugs, including psychedelics such as psilocybin, MDMA and ibogaine. However, it picked up considerably more votes this round than [when the congresswoman first introduced it](#) in 2019.

Report provisions of separate, House-passed spending legislation also touch on the need to [expand cannabis and psychedelics research](#). The panel urged the National Institute On Drug Abuse to support expanded marijuana studies, for example.

It further stated that federal health agencies should [pursue research into the therapeutic potential of psychedelics](#) for military veterans

when it comes to broader drug policy reform, Oregon voters also approved an initiative in November to [decriminalize possession of all](#)



drugs. This year, the Maine House of Representatives passed a drug decriminalization bill, but it later died in the Senate.

In May, lawmakers in Congress filed the first-ever legislation to federally decriminalize possession of state-banned substances.

Read the full summary of the OEIR task force recommendations below:

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The Oregon Emergency Response Recovery (OER) Task Force

The Oregon Emergency Response Recovery (OER) Task Force is a group of interdisciplinary individuals with a wide range of expertise from a variety of state and local government, academic, and private sector organizations. The task force was established in 2019 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic impact. The task force's mission is to provide recommendations to the Governor and the Legislature on how to best respond to the economic challenges posed by the pandemic. The task force's report is a comprehensive analysis of the economic challenges posed by the pandemic and provides recommendations for how to best respond to these challenges. The report is a valuable resource for policymakers and the public alike.

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