

MEDIA ADVISORY FOR: March 19 – 22

CONTACT: Troy Vaughn, troyvaughn@lareenry.org

Los Angeles Activists Join Delegation to Portugal March 19-22 to Learn from Country's Groundbreaking Drug Decriminalization Policy

Portugal's Dramatic Declines in Overdose Deaths, HIV Infections & Drug-Related Arrests Draw Those Hit Hardest by U.S. Drug War to Investigate Further

What has Portugal learned since they implemented the decriminalization of all drugs in 2001? How did the country go from having the highest rate of overdose fatalities in the E.U. to the second lowest? How did they go from having the highest rate of injection drug-transmitted HIV infections in the E.U. to the lowest rate of new HIV infections from intravenous drug use? What has been the impact of Portugal's dramatic decline (60 percent) of people arrested and referred to criminal court for drug law violations? What can the City of Los Angeles learn from Portugal's accomplishments in a moment when the current Attorney General is seeking to roll back gains made by drug policy reformers in reducing the consequent harms of the drug war?

A delegation of people organized by the Drug Policy Alliance who have been hit hardest by the U.S. war on drugs – from those who have been incarcerated for drug offenses to those who have lost loved ones to an overdose – are heading to Portugal March 19 – 21 to investigate these questions and more. Over 70 participants will be arriving from New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, North Carolina and other cities across the country, including Co-Founder and Executive Director of the Los Angeles Regional Reentry Partnership, Troy Vaughn and Executive Director of Center for Living and Learning, Maria Alexander. Troy is active in local, state and federal initiatives in both for profit and not-for-profit sectors that provide services to disenfranchised populations, including programs on institutional community systems analysis, and community and public relations. Maria is a member of long-term recovery and is a formerly incarcerated person who advocates for sensible drug and sentencing policies and reducing the stigma of those same populations.

“We hope to learn from the Portuguese model with the decriminalization of illicit drugs to adopt methods that are necessary for collaborations between the criminal justice system and health systems. The trepidations of mass incarceration and mass criminalization in Los Angeles are profound. Alternatives to incarceration can repair harms suffered by victims, provide benefits to the community, treat the drug-addicted or mentally ill, and rehabilitate returning citizens,” said Troy Vaughn, Co-Founder and Executive Director at the Los Angeles Regional Reentry Partnership. “Understanding how we can adopt a mindset of viewing safety as a public health framework that allows our health and safety delivery systems to work more efficiently together so that their

aligned aim is focused at satisfying our community member's needs is what we hope to learn with the Portugal visit.”

Los Angeles County currently is the largest jail in the world where incarceration rate for black males in Los Angeles County is 13 times more than their white counterparts. Black people represent just 8% of the county's population, but account for 30% of those jailed for Marijuana Only offenses. The collateral consequences result in 4,800 legal restrictions for individuals with such convictions leaving them with barriers to employment and housing.

In Portugal, the delegation will hear from João Goulão, the Portuguese General Director for Intervention on Addictive Behaviors and Dependencies; as well as experts from the Ministry of Public Health, NGO leaders, active drug users and formerly incarcerated people. The delegation will also visit the largest drug treatment center in Lisbon; tour methadone maintenance vans located throughout the city offering an opioid substitute; and shadow harm reduction street teams that do direct intervention with active IV drug users, including refugees, chronically homeless people, and sex workers.

In the U.S. there are almost as many drug-related deaths per year as there are lives lost to guns and car accidents combined. In addition, the criminalization of drug possession is a major driver of mass incarceration and mass criminalization. Each year, U.S. law enforcement makes more than 1.5 million drug arrests. The overwhelming majority — more than 80 percent — are for possession only. Discriminatory enforcement of drug possession laws has produced profound racial and ethnic disparities at all levels of the criminal justice system.

Further Details about Portugal's Decriminalization Policy and its Impacts

In 2001, Portuguese legislators eliminated criminal penalties for low-level possession and consumption of *all drugs* and reclassified these activities as “administrative violations” (the equivalent of a traffic ticket). The policy also included a major expansion of treatment and harm reduction services, including access to sterile syringes, methadone maintenance, and the elimination of most barriers to such vital services. Drug trafficking remains illegal and is still processed through the criminal justice system. The results? According to the Drug Policy Alliance report, [It's Time for the U.S. to Decriminalize Drug Use and Possession](#), which examined the results of Portugal's drug policy:

- The percentage of people behind bars in Portugal for drug law violations has decreased dramatically, from 44 percent in 1999 to 24 percent in 2013.
- The percentage of people arrested and sent to criminal court for drug possession declined by 60 percent.
- Between 1998 and 2011, the number of people in drug treatment increased by more than 60 percent (from approximately 23,600 to roughly 38,000). Over 70

percent of those who seek treatment receive opioid-substitution therapy, the most effective treatment for opioid dependence.

- The number of new HIV diagnoses dropped dramatically – from 1,575 cases in 2000 to 78 cases in 2013 – and the number of new AIDS cases decreased from 626 in 2000 to 74 cases in 2013 (in a country of just over 10 million people).
- Drug overdose fatalities dropped from about 80 in 2001 to just 16 in 2012.
- The Health Ministry estimates that only [about 25,000](#) Portuguese use heroin, down from 100,000 when the policy began.
- The Portuguese Health Ministry spends less than \$10 per citizen per year on its successful drug policy. Meanwhile the US has spent some \$10K per household (more than \$1 trillion total) over the decades on a failed drug policy that results in more than 1,000 deaths each week.
- Perhaps most significantly, by removing the threat of criminal penalties, Portugal took away the fear and stigma associated with seeking treatment. Now those who need treatment come to it voluntarily – and are more likely to succeed as a result.