

U.S. Mayors Declare Drug War a Failure

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News Feature

By Bob Curley

The mayors of America's large cities have unanimously approved a resolution stating that the drug war "has failed" and calling for a harm-reduction oriented approach to drug policy that focuses on public health.

The U.S. Conference of Mayors adopted the resolution during its June 21-26 annual meeting in Los Angeles, calling for a "new bottom line" in drug policy that "concentrates more fully on reducing the negative consequences associated with drug abuse, while ensuring that our policies do not exacerbate these problems or create new social problems of their own; establishes quantifiable, short- and long-term objectives for drug policy; saves taxpayers money; and holds state and federal agencies responsible."

Sponsored by Salt Lake City Mayor Rocky Anderson, the resolution states that the drug war costs \$40 billion annually but has not cut drug use or demand. It slams the Office of National Drug Control Policy's (ONDCP) drug-prevention programs -- specifically, the agency's national anti-drug media campaign -- as "costly and ineffective," but called drug treatment cost-effective and a major contributor to public safety because it prevents criminal behavior.

"This Conference recognizes that addiction is a chronic medical illness that is treatable, and drug treatment success rates exceed those of many cancer therapies," the document states.

The resolution condemns mandatory minimum sentences and incarceration of drug offenders, particularly minorities, and called for more control of anti-drug spending and priorities at the local level, where the impact is most acutely felt.

"U.S. policy should not be measured solely on drug-use levels or number of people imprisoned, but rather on the amount of drug-related harm reduced," according to the resolution. The document calls for more accountability among federal, state and local drug agencies, with funding tied to performance measures, more treatment funding and alternatives to incarceration, and lifting the federal funding ban for needle-exchanges.

The resolution, which will be used to guide the U.S. Conference of Mayors' Washington lobbying on addiction issues, passed with minimal debate, clearing two committees and the general assembly by unanimous votes.

"The mayors are clearly signaling the serious need for drug policy reform," said Daniel Abrahamson, director of legal affairs for the Drug Policy Alliance (DPA), who worked with Anderson's staff to draft the resolution. Daniel Robelo, a DPA legal research assistant, said the resolution could become an "incredibly powerful" advocacy tool for DPA and other drug-reform groups. "While it has no legal effect, it has a powerful symbolic effect," he told Join Together.

Alexa Eggleston, director of national policy for the Legal Action Center, which advocates for increased investment in addiction treatment and prevention, praised the mayors for acknowledging "that alcohol and drug addiction is a treatable medical illness and is supportive of expanding treatment to the approximately 21 million Americans with alcohol and drug problems who need it, expanding effective prevention initiatives in communities nationwide, and fighting discrimination against people with addiction histories by repealing discriminatory laws and policies that prevent them from accessing employment, insurance, and other necessities of life."

But Tom Riley, a spokesperson for ONDCP, called the resolution a "grab bag" of DPA positions and a publicity stunt by proponents of drug legalization. "We don't think it's very serious," he said

of the resolution, adding that to declare the drug war a failure "is a slogan rather than a policy proposal."

"Most of the mayors our office talks to consider drugs a huge problem in their communities and are anxious to get more resources for prevention, treatment and law enforcement," said Riley. "I don't know many mayors who are in favor of drug legalization."

Anderson is no newcomer to the drug issue; he has previously called the drug war "phony, inhumane, and ineffective," and his official biography calls him "an outspoken advocate for drug policy reform." He received the DPA's 2005 Richard J. Dennis Drugpeace Award for outstanding achievements in the field of drug policy reform.

Nor is Anderson alone in his harsh criticism of the drug war: Newark Mayor Cory Booker, seen as a rising political leader, recently stated that he's prepared to go to jail to protest a war on drugs that he sees as shackling African-Americans into poverty and feeding crime and murder in his city.

"I'm going to battle on this," Booker recently told the Newark Star-Ledger. "We're going to start this in the gentlemanly way. And then we're going to do the civil disobedience way. Because this is absurd."

Booker says he wants to see nonviolent drug offenders placed in treatment programs and halfway houses, not prisons, and to stop banning ex-offenders from jobs. "The drug war is causing crime," he said. "It's just chewing up young black men. And it's killing Newark."

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