

Press Release

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SAFE Glen Cove Coalition: Harm Reduction's Perspective on Incarcerating People with Substance Use Disorder

A recent WSKG broadcast featured Dr. Kimberly Sue, the Medical Director of Harm Reduction Coalition, a national advocacy group that works to change U.S. policies and attitudes about the treatment of drug users. Harm Reduction Coalition was founded in 1993 and incorporated in 1994 by a diverse network of needle exchange providers, advocates and drug users who seek to challenge the persistent stigma faced by people who use drugs and advocate for policy and public health reform.

Dr Sue is a Harvard-trained anthropologist and a physician at the Rikers Island jail system in New York who believes incarceration is not an effective social policy nor is it evidence-based evidence-based to prove incarceration is effective in deterring crime. While a quarter or more of the U.S. prison population has an addiction to opioids, only 5% of those individuals receive medication for their chronic condition, Sue notes, despite the growing agreement among doctors that this approach to treatment saves lives. Statistics suggest that women might benefit most from improvements in treatment.

The rate of death from prescription opioid overdose has gone up nearly 500% among women since 1999, compared with 200% among men. And in recent decades the rate of incarceration of women is still relatively small compared to that of men, but it's gone up 840% over the past 40 years.

Dr. Sue recently published a book entitled, *Getting Wrecked: Women, Incarceration, and the American Opioid Crisis*, which is based on firsthand accounts from female inmates she has treated. Dr. Sue argues that incarceration is not the best public health solution to opioid use because in many cases it harms people. For example, having been in solitary confinement increases your risk of death after release—the rate of opioid overdose in the first two weeks after people leave prison and jail is between 30 and 120 times higher than the general population.

In most of the county-level jails in this country, people are forced to withdraw off lifesaving, stabilizing medications [like methadone] against their will. Methadone is a treatment for opioid use disorder that you cannot access in jails in many places in this country. There are documented cases of suicide around the country of people who are going through withdrawal in jails and either committing suicide or dying as a combination of medical neglect and loss of body fluids related to dehydration.

Dr. Sue hopes this country changes its perspective on substance use in general and possibly follow a model placed into action in Portugal where drug use has been decriminalized and instead is treated like a social condition, and all of the services that an individual would need get wrapped around it by

providing mobile vans to bring methadone to the user. After Portugal decriminalized drug use, overdose deaths decreased by 80% and HIV rates went from 52% to 6%. Dr Sue maintains Portugal's model is not perfect but more effective than what is currently being utilized in the States.

WSKG provides educational programming, explores the arts, culture and heritage of the region and beyond, engage in thoughtful consideration of news and issues of importance, and entertain in multimedia programming. To learn more please visit www.wskg.org.

To learn more about the Harm Reduction Coalition please visit <https://harmreduction.org>.

SAFE, Inc. is the only alcohol and substance abuse prevention, intervention and education agency in the City of Glen Cove. Its Coalition is conducting an opioid prevention awareness campaign entitled, "Keeping Glen Cove SAFE," in order to educate and update the community regarding opioid use and its consequences. To learn more about the SAFE Glen Cove Coalition please follow us on www.facebook.com/safeglencovecoalition or visit SAFE's website to learn more about the Opioid Epidemic at www.safeglencove.org