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Leading the way to a more compassionate way to help addicts

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Every five minutes a human being dies from an overdose of opioids, such as OxyContin and fentanyl. Rhode Islanders lost 435 to drug overdoses in 2021.

By the time you read this, someone has lost a father, mother, grandparent, son, daughter, aunt, uncle, partner or friend. Individuals and families struggling with addiction suffer from discrimination, bias, stigma and isolation. It is even more painful for those who already face discrimination due to race, class and gender. Some individuals are not ready or able to quit using, not just the illegal drugs, but also the legal: alcohol and tobacco. It is time to build on a best practice called harm reduction, which is proven to save lives while offering an opportunity for individuals to change.

The time is here, and Rhode Island is the first state in the nation to *authorize* harm reduction centers (New York City opened the first center last year) and will open a supervised safe injection site in Providence next year. Project Weber/Renew and CODAC will lead the way to offer safe compassion care, coupled with access to treatment resources.

A public health approach to addictions/mental health and health, with a lens to lessen the stigma of disease, is just and pragmatic. Approaches are needed to address illegal drugs, which conjure up deeply rooted shame, discrimination and oppression for those who struggle with addiction. The legal drugs, alcohol and tobacco, for example, are quite addictive, but perceived differently in our society.

Last year, I traveled to Portugal to learn more about their drug decriminalization policies and programs. Portugal's approach, using harm reduction, prioritizes health, rather than criminalizing drug users and offers valuable lessons for saving lives. This approach lessens the stigma of a disease and meets people where they are in the addiction process. It is time

to use treatment and prevention efforts that work and are supported by science. Harm reduction strategies have historical roots in Europe, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, as well as neighboring Canada.

Rhode Island is leading the way to roll out harm reduction centers to shift the stigma of addiction and save lives. The lessons and stories learned in Portugal offered me hope. I applaud all those who are working diligently to save lives and listening to the stories of individuals who are struggling. They deserve hope and access to resources.

I am off to Switzerland next year to study more about harm reduction strategies and will proudly share the Rhode Island story.

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