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# A NATIONAL PLAN FOR LOCAL SOLUTIONS

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## *What is the Major Cities Initiative?*

### **Birth of an Idea**

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In the 2002 National Drug Control Strategy, President George W. Bush pledged to reduce drug use among all Americans by 10 percent in two years and by 25 percent in five years. To meet these goals, the Office of National Drug Control Policy realized it needed an approach that would have widespread impact and would draw on the tremendous energy and talents of citizens and officials at the local level. Drug use harms communities everywhere, but big cities are particularly hard hit. A recent survey showed that metropolitan areas in the United States have the highest rates of current illicit drug use.<sup>6</sup>

As part of its strategy to accomplish the President's objectives, ONDCP launched an ambitious new initiative in 2003 that directly engaged with officials and concerned citizens in 25 of the nation's largest metropolitan areas. The plan was to identify specific problems and establish long-term goals: to stop drug use before it starts; to heal those who are using drugs, and to disrupt the drug market. Beyond the obvious local benefit, shrinking the drug problem in major cities would have the effect of lowering the drug-use rate for the entire Nation.

Each of the areas targeted in the initiative presents unique challenges when it comes to substance abuse. Each also possesses an array of resources and strategies for preventing drug use or coping with its consequences. ONDCP's plan was not to create additional programs and layers of bureaucracy. Rather, the idea was to help those areas make better use of the tools already available to them and to devise ways of measuring their effectiveness. With better coordination and leveraging of resources, the cities would be able to improve the effectiveness of their substance-abuse systems and identify which strategies work best.

From the beginning, one premise of the Major Cities Initiative was that local communities can learn valuable lessons from one another. Many cities have developed creative strategies for combating drug use, and these techniques hold promise for other cities facing similar problems. Another assumption was that an effective drug strategy requires good organization and a strong, varied approach. Tackling the

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<sup>6</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), *2004 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National Findings*, Washington DC: Department of Health and Human Services, 2005.

problem from many directions simultaneously and with a variety of program types, all carefully synchronized and implemented in a focused, intelligent manner, can bring about significant and measurable results.

With the Major Cities Initiative, ONDCP envisioned the creation of partnerships that would capitalize on the know-how and skills of a wide variety of individuals, ranging from government officials and community leaders to educators and experts in the substance-abuse field. Participants were asked to work together to create an organizational structure that links the pillars of effective drug control: prevention, treatment, and law enforcement.

The program attempts to strengthen local communities by helping them develop the flexibility, coordination, and collaboration necessary to fight substance abuse effectively. Through the Major Cities Initiative, ONDCP hopes to reduce drug use in participating cities by:

- encouraging the use of proven practices, policies, strategies, and techniques;
- promoting coordination, collaboration, and resource-leveraging among all segments of the community; and
- assisting in the gathering and maintenance of data that accurately reflect the current state of drug use and the outcomes of interventions.

In coming years, ONDCP will continue to develop and maintain strong relationships with selected cities as it works to bring about significant reductions in drug use, as indicated by the following key measures:

- past-month and past-year use of illegal drugs by young people
- the prevalence and type of drugs used among individuals arrested and booked for crimes
- drug-related emergency department visits
- price and purity of drugs sold on the street
- scope and effectiveness of student drug-testing programs
- drug-court referrals to treatment
- outcomes of treatment
- capacity and use of treatment resources
- prevalence and effectiveness of anti-drug coalitions