

Mixed results for Oregon's pioneering drug decriminalization

By **ANDREW SELSKY**
The Associated Press

SALEM — Oregon voters approved a ballot measure in 2020 to decriminalize hard drugs after being told it was a way to establish and fund addiction recovery centers that would offer people aid instead of incarceration.

Yet in the first year after the new approach took effect in February 2021, only 1% of people who received citations for possessing controlled substances asked for help via a new hotline.

With Oregon being the first state in America to decriminalize possession of personal-use amounts of heroin, methamphetamine, LSD, oxycodone and other drugs, its program is being watched as a potential model for other states.

Some are questioning whether the approach is proving too lenient, but others say the new system has already had a positive impact by redirecting millions of dollars into facilities to help those with drug

dependency issues. The funds come from taxes generated by Oregon's legal marijuana industry and savings from reductions in arrests, jail time and probation supervision.

Under Ballot Measure 110, possession of controlled substances is now a newly created Class E "violation," instead of a felony or misdemeanor. It carries a maximum \$100 fine, which can be waived if the person calls a hotline for a health assessment. The call can lead to addiction counseling and other services.

But out of roughly 2,000 citations issued by police in the year after decriminalization took effect, only 92 of the people who received them called the hotline by mid-February. And only 19 requested resources for services, said William Nunemann of Lines for Life, which runs the hotline.

Almost half of those who got citations failed to show up in court.

State health officials have reported 473 unintentional opioid overdose deaths from



Andrew Selsky/The Associated Press
Vanessa Caudel, a nurse, sits at her work station in the Great Circle treatment center in Salem on Thursday, Feb. 24, 2022, where she provides doses of methadone, which can relieve the "dope sick" symptoms a person in opioid withdrawal experiences. The center gets funding from Oregon's pioneering drug decriminalization law and illustrates an aspect of the new system, one year after it took effect.

January to August 2021, the most recent month for which statistics are available, with the vast majority of those occurring after decriminalization took effect. That narrowly surpasses the total for all of 2020, and is nearly 200 deaths more than the state saw in all of 2019. The state reports that opioid overdose visits to emergency rooms and urgent care centers have also been on the rise.

The Oregon Health Authority cites as possible reasons the greater presence of fentanyl, which has increased overdose deaths across the country, as well as a downturn in reporting during the pandemic in 2020.

Sen. Floyd Prozanski, chair of the Oregon Senate's Judiciary and Ballot Measure 110 Implementation Committee, said he's surprised more of those tick-

eted weren't taking advantage of the recovery options. Still, he believes it's too early to judge how the new approach is going.

"It's a different model, at least for the U.S.," Prozanski said, adding he'd want to wait at least another half-year before considering whether steps should be introduced to compel people to seek treatment.

Decriminalization advocates argued putting drug users in jail and giving them criminal records, which harms job and housing prospects, was not working.

"Punishing people and these punitive actions, all it does is saddle them with barriers and more stigma and more shame," said Tera Hurst, executive director of Oregon Health Justice Recovery Alliance, which represents more than 75 community-based organizations and is focused on implementing Measure 110.

The Drug Policy Alliance spearheaded Oregon's ballot measure. With no U.S. states to serve as examples, the New York-based

group, which calls itself the leading organization in the U.S. promoting alternatives to the war on drugs, studied Portugal, which decriminalized drug possession in 2000.

Portugal's approach is more vigorous than Oregon's in getting people to treatment.

There, "dissuasion commissions" pressure anyone caught using drugs — even marijuana — to seek treatment. Those pressure points include fines, prohibiting drug users from visiting certain venues or from traveling abroad, seizure of personal property, community work and having to periodically report to health services or other places.

Drug Policy Alliance intentionally sought an approach that did not compel people to seek treatment, said spokesperson Matt Sutton.

"We have seen that when people voluntarily access services when they are ready, they have much more successful outcomes," Sutton said.

EDUCATION

Report outlines steps to make Oregon early childhood programs more inclusive

By **ELIZABETH MILLER**
Oregon Public Broadcasting

SALEM — According to federal data, about 48% of young children experiencing disabilities in Oregon receive all services in preschools and other early learning settings.

And according to a new report, Oregon programs still have a ways to go in being fully inclusive.

"Since the Individuals with Disabilities Act was developed 30 plus years ago, children experiencing disabilities have limited access, or are often asked to leave care even in preschool," said Oregon

Department of Education Early Childhood Coherent Strategies Specialist Meredith Villines.

"So we're hoping to change that."

Oregon, along with Illinois, was awarded a national grant to help create a framework for what inclusion should look like in early learning programs. This first of what's intended to be an annual report released Thursday, March 31, the Oregon Early Childhood Inclusion report outlines Oregon's progress, starting with making sure certain indicators are met across the state.

"The indicators that we're really focused on are those cross-sector collaborative teams, and really creating and funding professional development supports for everyone who is engaged in the care and education of young children experiencing disabilities," Villines said.

The report says Oregon is showing improvement, in terms of statewide indicators including policies, funding, and sharing new guidance.

The Senior Leadership Team "has developed a cross-sector team, increased understanding of early learning policies and

current guidance affecting inclusion of children experiencing disability, reviewed the current allocation of resources to support professionals in early care and education, and developed a snapshot of the coordination of professional development resources for those serving young children experiencing disability," over a 20-month period between February 2020 and October 2021, according to a self-assessment.

Three Oregon counties pointed out in the report also show progress in meeting community indicators including building awareness and providing

access to training. As part of the pilot project, community inclusion teams in Multnomah, Clackamas and Lincoln counties meet monthly to work towards making early learning programs in their community more inclusive, serving as a model for other communities.

"We're hoping to provide technical assistance support so those communities can partner with other members of their community to problem solve and come up with innovative solutions to this complex problem," Villines said.

Going forward, the three counties plan to "sustain

funding and scale inclusive practices."

The counties have also set goals to bring more children experiencing disabilities into programs: to 30% in Lincoln County, to 60% in Multnomah County, to 65% in Clackamas County by 2023.

The next annual report, Villines said, will likely highlight scenes inside educational settings.

"What's next is seeing the on-the-ground work, the impacts on programs and how they have been working together in this similar cross-sector fashion, and the impact in the classrooms," Villines said.

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