



Welcome remarks by International President, Amy Ronshausen, at the AYCRIP, ECAD and WFAD commemoration of the World Drug Day 2020.

Welcome, I know we have participants from across the globe so I will say good morning, afternoon, or evening to you all! My name is Amy Ronshausen and I am the executive director of Drug Free America Foundation and am also honored to serve as the International President of the World Federation Against Drugs.

Today is a special day. In 1987, the UN General Assembly dedicated June 26 as the International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking. Each year today is supported by individuals, communities, and various organizations all over the world to raise awareness of the major problem that illicit drugs represent to society. The theme this year is “Better Knowledge for Better Care.” The theme emphasizes the need to improve our understanding of the world drug problem and how in turn, our better knowledge will inform evidence based and data driven solutions to provide better care in our communities. This knowledge will aid in fostering international collaborations for countering the impacts drugs have on health, environment, and security.

The most recent World Drug Report estimates that 269 million people, or 5.3 per cent of the global population aged 15–64, used drugs in the previous year. This is an increase of 30% from just a decade ago. Adolescents and young adults account for the largest share of those using drugs.

More than 35 million people are estimated to be suffering from drug use disorders but only one in eight people who need drug-related treatment services receive it. For people with substance use disorders, the availability of services remains limited at the global level. One of three drug users is female however women only account for one in five of individuals in treatment. Minorities, immigrants, and displaced people also face barriers to treatment services due to discrimination and stigma.

With more than 35 million globally estimated to have a substance use disorder and an estimated 585,000 lives lost because of drug use in just one year, one could argue we are experiencing a global drug crisis. The numbers are devastating but the reality is heartbreaking, these are our beloved friends, family members, neighbors, co-workers. It is important that as we talk about the numbers, we remember that each one of them represents a member of our global society. To put that number in perspective, the premiere league football club stadium where Manchester United plays sells can hold 75,000 people. Imagine the people it would take to fill 8 of those stadiums gone in one year because of drug use. As a global community we have made strides in promoting prevention, advocating for increased access to care and working to empower those in recovery. We have increased trainings for prevention and treatment professionals and we continue to share data and research to push for policies that put public health and safety first and we continue to strengthen our voice to speak truth to those in positions of power.



And then a few months ago, our world suddenly changed. The COVID 19 pandemic has to date resulted in 484 thousand deaths, and over 9 million reported cases pushing health care providers to their limits and causing an economic crisis. Shelter-in-place orders have pushed everyone into isolation leading to decreased access to prevention and treatment services as well as healthy outlets and activities that provide a distraction from addictions. Individuals on MAT had difficulty getting their medication in many parts of the world which increased their risk of relapse and overdose.

As Prevention professionals we are suddenly forced to think outside of the box. With schools and businesses closed, sports and social clubs on hold our hands-on approach was lost. Yes, virtual prevention strategies have been under way for years and social media campaigns continue but prevention isn't just about providing data and research, it's also about building healthy habits both physically and mentally and isolation and physical distancing has made some of our go to prevention programming harder to employ.

But we can accept this challenge because the main principals of effective prevention strategies have not changed. I will not go into all of them but of the main principals is that Prevention programs should enhance protective factors and reverse or reduce risk factors.

COVID 19 has significantly increased risk factors that make individuals vulnerable to potential behavioral health issues, in this case substance abuse. Those risk factors could include lack of economic opportunity; the pandemic has forced tens of millions around the world out of their jobs. With schools closed, many of our youth are missing their main food supply, or it could mean more time in a drug endangered home.

For prevention this means that we must meet people where they are at. Yes, we can continue our virtual educational platforms and host prevention activities and group meetings online. We can and should continue and expand those efforts. I am continuously amazed at the creativity of how we learn to communicate and expand our capacity and am inspired by how in the face of a global pandemic we have accepted the challenges and adapted to continue the mission.

But let us not forget that about our most vulnerable and prioritize those prevention efforts. Many are not having their basic needs met during this pandemic and that must come first. A wash your hands message to prevent the spread of infectious disease is valuable and needed but so is the access to clean water to achieve that goal.

Preventing drug abuse, curbing addiction, and increasing the number of people in recovery requires a focus on education, policy reform and family and community engagement. Addiction is a chronic disease that affects the brain, and individuals with substance use disorders deserve to be treated with dignity. We know that primary prevention and treatment work and that recovery is possible. Now more than ever it is important to understand and educate key stakeholders that the development of a substance use disorder is related to the relationship between a number of risk and protective factors that are often beyond the control of an individual. It is our job to enact policies that enhance like skills that reduce risk factors and build up and enrich protective factors.



During the pandemic we have seen an array of policies put in place to address the accessibility of substances. For example, a few countries banned the sale of alcohol while on lock down. There is early data to suggest that the bans did decrease public health and public safety issues related to alcohol abuse while other information points to an increase in black market sales and dangerous home brews. In contrast in the US, alcohol stores and marijuana dispensaries were named as an essential business and allowed to remain open. Not only were they deemed essential, special rights were granted to allow for take away and delivery services that were previously considered illegal before the pandemic. What messages do these policies send to our youth?

The role of prevention in the era of COVID 19 and beyond should look at the public health response to this pandemic and learn from it. It is imperative that our prevention action plan includes seeking government support in making prevention a priority. Funding for prevention and drug related programs with the development of interventions governments are implementing to address the negative societal costs related to the pandemic are vital. Advocacy efforts should include Integrating substance use prevention and treatment with COVID- 19 response and recovery efforts. As we create teams to test, track and trace COVID-19 infections, we must also treat patients and their family members suffering from, or at risk for mental health and substance use disorders and to make sure those with OUD have access to MAT and naloxone.

Second our prevention efforts should include educational campaigns on the heightened risks of substance use in the context of COVID-19 and information on where individuals can turn for help.

Lastly, the pandemic has created the greatest forced isolation in our modern history. It is imperative to remain socially connected through events like this and to advocate for mechanisms to provide resources for rural areas and minority community who may not have the bandwidth or internet access to host such events.

On behalf of Drug Free America Foundation and the World Federation against drugs I want to thank you for your commitment in being here today. I encourage you to share your challenges so we can work together to meet your needs and to share your successes so we can replicate those strategies across the globe. It is the morning in my time zone, and I am happy to start the day with you. I look forward to hearing from our other speakers and I wish you all a successful day full of purpose and hope.