

# Executive Summary



Substance use disorders (SUDs), also known as substance abuse or addiction, affect Americans in all walks of life. An estimated 20 million or more adolescents and adults in the United States—1 in 12—have an SUD, defined as continued use of drugs or alcohol despite trying to stop and/or causing harm to self or others.<sup>2</sup> You probably know someone with an SUD, but most people with an SUD don't talk about it. Stigma and shame keep the disorder hidden, undertreated, and misunderstood.

SUD symptoms can show up in hurtful or even illegal behaviors that can appear to be simply a matter of choice, and it can be difficult to understand why someone can't just stop. We know that people with SUDs experience changes in their brain that make it harder and harder to stop using, but we still have more to learn about why that happens and how to prevent it. What we do know is that bringing evidence-based care to SUD patients gets results: more people get better more quickly, and the pain and damage the disorder can cause to patients and families are reduced.

Lifting the burden of SUDs has another benefit: reduced costs. America spends billions of dollars a year on costs related to SUDs, more than on smoking and obesity combined.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, this spending is not always well targeted, and the rate of SUDs remains steady—as does the harm they cause to patients, their families, and communities. The good news is that the context for discussion and treatment of SUDs is changing, and there is a wealth of opportunities for philanthropists to make a difference.

## How to read this guide

In the following pages, we present a portfolio of high-impact opportunities to address the negative impacts of SUDs. The opportunities are divided into four high-level strategies, with potential non-profit partners and implementers highlighted in each:

- **Strategy 1: Save lives and reduce SUD-related illness and homelessness right now.** There are tools that have been shown again and again to save lives and reduce the harm and immediate risk caused by SUDs, as well as save money and open the door to treatment. These include overdose prevention medications, clean syringe programs, supportive housing, and legal assistance to help ensure that patients' basic needs are met, even if recovery remains elusive. Many of these approaches offer a double benefit: they are compassionate, recognizing that those with the most severe SUDs need help; and they save taxpayers money by reducing use of costly emergency services. The evidence shows that these tools work, but they aren't commonly put into practice. Philanthropic support can help change that.
- **Strategy 2: Improve access to evidence-based treatment.** There are opportunities to help extend available treatment options to all SUD patients, including particularly vulnerable groups. For many people, treatment is synonymous with Alcoholics Anonymous or similar programs. In reality, 12-step programs and support groups like AA are just some of the many tools available to help SUD patients recover. Options with good evidence of success include cognitive behavioral therapy, mindfulness training, medication-assisted treatment, and more. Improving treatment often means simply expanding the range of options. For many patients, access to a broader range of treatment options and more comprehensive care can mean the difference between recovery or a continued downward spiral. Philanthropic support can make that access possible.

- **Strategy 3: Improve SUD care by changing systems and policies.** Health care reform has made it possible for hundreds of thousands of Americans to access better mental health and SUD treatment, but broader access requires better implementation. Philanthropists can support organizations working with policymakers and administrators to ensure that access to care continues to improve and that the care itself is informed by the best available evidence.
- **Strategy 4: Fund innovation to improve prevention and treatment.** The sector continues to grapple with big questions about how to prevent SUDs, how to develop and deliver better care, and how to help reduce the stigma that keeps so many SUD patients from accessing the care they need. Philanthropists can support research to learn more about these questions and pilot new programs to help people benefit from that knowledge.

High-impact opportunities in each category are presented in the following pages and summarized in the table on page iv. The format of each opportunity varies slightly, particularly between direct service and research or policy work. In policy and research, the impact on the people you hope to help is more removed from the point of funding, and the chain of cause and effect can be more difficult to see clearly. But those downsides are, for some funders, balanced by the potential to impact large numbers of people in lasting and meaningful ways as a result of a single change—sometimes with the stroke of a pen. Whether in research, policy, or direct service, the common thread across all of the opportunities in this guide is the positive impact they can create.

We present a range of options knowing that not every opportunity will appeal to every funder. We hope the broad scope allows funders of all types to find opportunities that fit within their philanthropic strategies. No matter what you support, the goal is the same: to reduce suffering and harm from substance use disorders, now and in the future. As always, we hope the information and opportunities presented in these pages will help donors move from good intentions to high impact.

