

Federal Cuts To Harm Reduction Services Threaten Historic Decline In Milwaukee Overdose Deaths

Ending harm reduction funding endangers people with substance disorders in Milwaukee, removing the safety net that keeps them alive until ready for treatment

MILWAUKEE, WI, UNITED STATES, May 19, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Sweeping federal cuts to harm reduction services are raising severe alarms among public health officials and community advocates in Milwaukee. The abrupt policy shift threatens to destabilize the city's recent and hard-won progress in curbing fatal drug overdoses, disproportionately endangering residents living with substance use disorders in marginalized communities.



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These policies are not just bad public policy; they are a matter of life and death. We need to keep people alive long enough to get them the help they need. That's what harm reduction is all about.”

Tahira Malik, Founder of Samad's House

In April, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration notified states that the federal government is terminating financial support for some harm reduction approaches. This marks a profound shift under the Great American Recovery Initiative, which now prioritizes abstinence and treatment over compassionate, evidence-based resources. For years, harm reduction initiatives have successfully provided life-saving tools like fentanyl test strips and naloxone, and have minimized the negative health, social, and economic consequences associated with drug use.

The impact of these resources is evident in recent local data. In 2025, Milwaukee recorded 383 fatal overdoses, representing a sharp and historic decline from a peak of 674 deaths in 2022. While drug fatalities are not declining at the same accelerated rate in communities of color, the overall nearly 50% reduction over three years mirrors a positive trend across the United States. Public officials and health advocates directly attribute this massive decline to expanded harm reduction efforts and strategic community interventions.

Experts across the healthcare spectrum maintain that stripping funding from these preventative

measures will cost thousands of lives. The new policy effectively abandons individuals who are not yet ready or able to seek formal treatment, removing the safety net that keeps them alive until they reach that point.

Just last week, the life-saving reality of harm reduction was demonstrated on the streets of Milwaukee. Tahira Malik, founder of [Samad's House](#) and a dedicated champion of these approaches, intervened to help a woman staggering in traffic along Center Street. Malik stopped her van, guided the woman to the sidewalk, and offered immediate support without judgment or conditions.

"Harm reduction helps this woman by doing exactly what I did—meeting her where she is and not judging her," Malik explained. "Not judging her is important. The first thing she said was, 'I'm not drunk, I'm not high.' In the back of my mind, I think she may be high, and maybe she wants to continue to get high, but my response was 'Hey, I didn't say you were. I don't think you are, but how can I help you?' That's harm reduction. It's about keeping people alive long enough to get the help they need."

Under the newly announced federal restrictions, individuals like the woman Malik assisted would be left without state-supported resources because they are not actively seeking treatment. Harm reduction tools such as clean needles and testing strips provide a critical bridge for these vulnerable populations.

"This is craziness. That's how serious it is," Malik said. "Harm reduction saves lives. Helping this woman reinforced the critical role harm reduction plays in saving lives and the devastating consequences of the federal government's move against harm reduction initiatives."

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Tahira Malik, Founder Samad's House

Critics argue that the federal government's decision to label harm reduction supplies as "enabling future drug use" ignores the grim realities of modern addiction. The street drug supply is increasingly toxic. As Malik explained, test strips check for deadly contaminants like xylazine, an animal sedative that prompts severe necrotizing wounds, and medetomidine, which causes prolonged sedation leading to cardiac damage.

"The federal government says they want to stop harm reduction resources, but yet, they are trying to ban countries like China and Mexico from shipping fentanyl here," Malik noted. "So they know these drugs are already here. Why stop helping people survive? These drugs are killing our people."

The burden of the defunding will fall heaviest on Black and Brown communities, where overdose declines have already lagged. Organizations like Samad's House, which provide sober living facilities, naloxone, and mental health support for women, will face tight constraints on their ability to perform critical community outreach.

"We need to prioritize harm reduction, not cut it," Malik said. "These policies are not just bad public policy; they are a matter of life and death. We need to keep people alive long enough to get them the help they need. That's what harm reduction is all about."

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(For media interviews with Tahira Malik, contact Michael Frisby at mike@frisbyassociates.com or 202-625-4328.)

About Samad's House

Samad's House is a Milwaukee-based organization dedicated to supporting women and families in recovery from addiction. Through holistic services, harm reduction tools, and a focus on mind, body, and spirit, Samad's House empowers individuals to rebuild their lives and achieve lasting sobriety.

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