



## ALCOHOLISM AND DRUG ABUSE WEEKLY

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### **ONDCP possibly up for elimination, sign-on letter sent to OMB**

When The New York Times reported Feb. 17 that the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) was slated for elimination by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), the addiction treatment field, already worried by the lack of a website for the office, went into overdrive. The purpose was to save an agency that had come to be, under former director Michael Botticelli, the leader of the federal government's move to transform the "drug war" into a focus on treatment and recovery. "We can't arrest our way out of the problem" was the battle cry of the ONDCP under Botticelli and his predecessor, former Police Chief R. Gil Kerlikowske. And the country's law enforcement community backed up this idea, giving the ONDCP extra credibility in quarters where it was badly needed.

By Thursday, a letter to OMB Director Mick Mulvaney supporting the ONDCP had garnered more than 200 signatures. Spearheaded by Kevin Sabet, Ph.D., who worked for the ONDCP for more than two years and is now director of the Drug Policy Institute at the University of Florida, where he is assistant professor, the letter was sent Feb. 23 (for a copy, go to <https://learnaboutsam.org/wpcontent/uploads/2017/02/FINALONDCP-COALITION-LETTER-1-1.pdf>).

The ONDCP is a popular agency, operating within the Executive Office of the President. No longer a cabinet position, however, the director is now outranked by others, including the attorney general and the secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services. Yet, the office's function — to coordinate strategy among the 16 federal agencies that support the national drug strategy — is key, Botticelli told us last week.

#### **Functions separate from policy**

The ONDCP has three main functions, said Botticelli. "By statute and authority, ONDCP creates our national drug control strategy," he said. Regardless of what policy an administration has, this function is essential. "ONDCP ensures that those agencies are doing what the strategy says, and that the federal budget is in accord with that," he said.

The second function of the ONDCP is to monitor the performance of the strategy: "Are we meeting our commitments, are we getting the outcomes that we want?"

And the third responsibility is to supervise the drug control budget — this is not the ONDCP's budget, but the dollars that each federal agency contributes to it. The ONDCP also has two grant programs — Drug-Free Communities (DFC) and High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA).

Implicit in the role of the ONDCP is the need to keep the drug issue a priority in the federal government, said Botticelli. "That's why ONDCP is in the Executive Office of the President," he said. "So some of the concerns I have if ONDCP went away would be that our efforts would become very haphazard, because there would not be one entity setting a national strategy." Without one agency to set policy, there would be a "diminished emphasis on drug control issues."

The ONDCP works closely in coordinating across different agencies, Botticelli noted. “We rely heavily on HHS for prevention, treatment, and recovery support,” he said. “We work closely with the Department of Justice on the law enforcement response. We coordinate with the State Department and Department of Homeland Security and Defense on stopping the flow of drugs.”

As for the two grant programs, Botticelli said DFC would probably continue under SAMHSA, if the ONDCP were eliminated, and he thinks SAMHSA would continue to support the program. “But if HIDTA were embedded in another law enforcement agency like the Drug Enforcement Administration, there’s a probability that the focus of those dollars might be diluted,” he said.

## **A way forward**

It’s important for people to make their voices heard, not only on preserving ONDCP, but on advocating for a “way forward,” said Botticelli. “This has to be not just the prevention and treatment groups, but law enforcement too,” he said. “And it’s important that this not be seen as a bipartisan issue.”

Unfortunately, nobody in the administration could talk to us about this, even though many support the ONDCP. As one person no longer in government said, “Elections have consequences. Fundamentally, it’s a Trump administration now.”

Emails to the ONDCP about this story were not returned. We called the White House press office, which told us to send an email, which was not returned.

Sharon LaFraniere, a reporter on the New York Times story, told us the information from OMB was accurate. This information also had the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities slated for discontinuation. Some sources suggested this information came from a memo that was not approved by OMB leadership, but rather derived from Heritage Foundation recommendations for a budget.

## **Former spokesmen**

“Eliminating ONDCP would significantly hinder President Trump’s ability to carry forth any comprehensive strategy to reduce drug use and its consequences in America,” said Rafael Lemaitre, who was the ONDCP spokesman for part of President Obama’s tenure. “Ironically, it would also increase government waste and abuse by eliminating the only agency that serves as a subject-matter watchdog for duplicative and ineffective drug control programs across government.”

**And Bob Weiner, a spokesman for the ONDCP in its early years, called elimination of the office “an inane option given the opioid crisis.” Weiner noted that President Trump said in his campaign that opioids were the number-one issue he heard about in New Hampshire.**

**Indeed, the only voices that supported the reported elimination of the ONDCP were pro-marijuana legalizers, who ignored the criminal justice reforms put forward by Botticelli’s ONDCP, which called for treatment instead of incarceration, and instead viewed the agency as an enemy.**

**“The drug legalizers would like nothing more than a return to the diffuse splatter of over 20 agencies with turf wars and no coordination instead of the successful comprehensive drug strategy that has reduced monthly drug use by nearly half since the highs of the 1960s and 1970s, reduced crack by two-thirds and brought crime to all-time lows,” said Weiner. “Afghanistan — the birthplace of al Qaeda — remains the number-one producer of opium for heroin, and Pakistan — the country that harbored Osama bin Laden — produces a third as much.” This drug money is a big course of funding for terrorists, he said. “This is no time for dithering,” he said.**

And from Lemaitre: “It would be management malpractice to shut down ONDCP in the midst of a national opioid epidemic and during a time of increased youth drug use in America.”

There are many people who would like the ONDCP to go back to the recent era of Botticelli, with a focus on treatment, prevention and recovery instead of enforcement and control. However, John Walters, ONDCP director in the George W. Bush administration, is helping to advise Trump on the ONDCP, and ADAW has already learned that the drug strategy will be more like Walters’ than Botticelli’s (see ADAW, Jan. 30). At this point, what will happen under the new ONDCP now appears to be less pressing than whether the ONDCP will continue to exist. •

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For a copy of the New York Times report, go to

[https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/17/us/politics/trump-program-eliminations-white-house-budget-office.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/17/us/politics/trump-program-eliminations-white-house-budget-office.html?_r=0)