

## Press Statement from Carla Sofronski, Pennsylvania Harm Reduction Network

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The Pennsylvania Harm Reduction Network is deeply disappointed that the Shapiro Administration has moved forward with its plan to schedule xylazine, ignoring the opinions of the public health, harm reduction and recovery communities.

Despite the administration's statement in their press release that this is a public health approach, this is not a public health approach—period. This is a criminal legal approach that continues the failed policies of the past.

The harm reduction community is disappointed and feels this administration is going backwards and reversing the progress that has been made in Pennsylvania over the last several years. People continue to die in the thousands due to preventable overdoses. What is the public health plan to address this? Where is the support for expanding syringe services programs, implementing drug checking programs and creating new protocols for overdose reversal, detox and wound care in this new world of xylazine?

Scheduling xylazine as a controlled substance will only further criminalize and stigmatize people who use drugs, as well as increase criminal penalties for possession. Decades of failed drug criminalization policies have caused more harm than the substances themselves by contributing to the over-policing of communities of color, mass incarceration, and stigmatizing those who struggle with problematic substance use. Pennsylvania has the 4<sup>th</sup> highest overdose death rate in the nation due to not prioritizing evidence-based harm reduction strategies and looking through the lens of law enforcement instead of public health.

Communities still lack adequate training and access to overdose prevention education, naloxone and testing supplies. Emergency departments, medical providers, first responders, and treatment professionals; need immediate education and training on new protocols for xylazine overdose, wound care, and xylazine-related withdrawal.

With the influx of funds from the Opioid Settlement(s), we call on the administration to ensure that funds will be used to expand and improve access to evidence-based harm reduction services that will immediately save lives and prevent the spread of infectious diseases. The

planning process at all levels of government must be fast-tracked, transparent, and led by the people closest to the problem. Pennsylvania can and must do better.