

NCHRC is North Carolina's only comprehensive harm reduction program. NCHRC engages in grassroots advocacy, resource development, coalition building and direct services for law enforcement and those made vulnerable by drug use, sex work, overdose, immigration status, gender, STIs, HIV and hepatitis.

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**The "War on Drugs" – Interview with Gail Phares, Director of Witness for Peace, Southeast Chapter**

*Written by NCHRC Staff Writer Tessie Castillo*

**NCHRC Note:** *NCHRC traveled to Los Angeles the first week of November 2011 to attend the International Drug Policy Alliance Reform Conference. A big theme of the conference is addressing the war on drugs. Thus we will share some articles on the war on drugs and its effects on the people of North Carolina & our neighbors. We will start by interviewing a North Carolinian person of faith and then follow up with a member of North Carolina's law enforcement on the war on drugs. The views of the people we interview are their views and do not represent the views of NCHRC. We understand some of these articles may be controversial with our audience, but this is a topic that should be explored by us who work or are affected by US drug policy.*

In 1968 President Nixon officially launched the "War on Drugs" in response to what was seen as a growing problem of drug use in the United States. At that time, approximately 1.3% of the U.S. population was considered addicted to drugs and the "War" was waged through measures such as heavy policing and arrests for drug possession and trafficking, building more prisons to house drug offenders, and harsh penalties for users. Over 40 years and 1 trillion tax dollars later, the rate of addiction in the U.S. holds steady at 1.3% and drugs are cheaper, purer, and easier to get than ever before[1].

One of the reasons for the ineffectiveness of the War on Drugs is that lawmakers have focused on diminishing the supply of drugs through arrests and drug seizures, and have done little to lower demand through effective harm reduction or treatment programs. Interestingly, attempts to constrict supply have only served to increase the value of illicit drugs, so that profits on a relatively worthless plant, such as the coca plant used to produce cocaine, or opium to produce heroin, can be as high as 17,000%[2]. With such outstanding profit margins, it's no wonder so many people risk their lives to get involved in the drug trade.

But the War has had other unintended side-effects as well. The U.S. holds 5% of the world's population and 25% of the world's prisoners, over half for nonviolent drug offenses[3]. Minority neighborhoods are hit the hardest; as many as 1 in 3 African American men can expect to serve time at some point in their lives. African Americans also represent 35% of arrests and 60% of those serving federal prison sentences for drug offenses, despite having a drug use and addiction rate equal to that of any other race[4]. Harsh laws such as mandatory minimum sentencing, which dole out 10 to 20-year sentences for drug possession without regard to individual circumstances, wreak havoc on neighborhoods and families, especially when parents are locked up and their children delivered to the foster care system. Equally harsh, 3-strike laws mandate that anyone convicted of a third felony earns prison for life. These laws disproportionately affect low-income individuals and people of color as they are least likely to be able to afford a private lawyer to fight for reduced penalties[5].

“Building more prisons to deal with the drug problem is like digging more graves to solve the AIDS pandemic,” writes Sanho Tree, Director of the Drug Policy Project[6]. Doling out prison sentences for non-violent drug offenses creates a system in which drug users, once they have a criminal record of arrest and conviction, can’t get jobs anymore, nor can they access public housing, public assistance, or other programs. Lack of economic options often drives them further into the drug trade[7].

Luckily, some organizations are working to educate Americans on the devastation caused by the War on Drugs, both in the United States and abroad, especially in countries like Mexico and Columbia that have been hard hit by our drug policies. Gail Phares is the Director of Witness for Peace, Southeast division, an organization that sends delegations of American volunteers to Latin America to see first-hand the consequences of U.S. foreign policy. Gail has led several delegations to Columbia to see the impact of the War on Drugs and U.S. fumigation programs. Through these programs U.S. airplanes have sprayed 26 million acres of Columbian farmland with pesticide in an attempt to kill coca plants that produce cocaine. Instead of eradicating these very hardy plants, we’ve poisoned rivers, food crops, and livestock, as well as destroyed the livelihoods of small farmers and displaced 5 million people. And the supply of cocaine to the U.S. remains the same.

“I took a delegation to Colombia for the first time in 2001, just after a fumigation program, and it looked like an atomic bomb had hit,” says Gail Phares. “The land was shriveled and brown, everywhere there was dead livestock and crops – not just coca plants since the pesticide killed food crops as well. Many children had fevers from the poison. I remember a farmer walking by us looking stunned and carrying a sick child in his arms. He kept mumbling over and over, ‘What will I do?’”

Delegations with Witness for Peace who return from these trips are equipped with the knowledge to educate our communities about the devastating consequences of the War on Drugs and also to pressure our politicians to abandon these failed policies.

“Our Representatives know that the War isn’t working,” explains Gail, “but most are afraid to admit it because they want to appear ‘tough on crime.’ Also, law enforcement gets a lot of funding to fight the drug war and they don’t want that taken away.”

Sanho Tree has written and spoken out against the War on Drugs for many years, and believes that there are some common sense solutions to curb drug violence and addiction. “Our policies should be directed against poverty, despair and alienation,” writes Sanho. Lack of hope often drives people towards drugs. If we could take the 50-60 billion dollars that the U.S. spends annually on law enforcement and incarceration of drug offenders, and instead invest that in education, health care, housing and jobs, drug use and addiction would decrease without any need to lock people away. Sanho is also an advocate for harm reduction programs such as syringe exchange to reduce the incidence of HIV and hepatitis C, decriminalization of life-saving equipment such as clean needles and clean pipes for crack and crystal meth users, holistic prevention and education on how to stay safe while you are using, and substance use treatment programs for those who seek it[8].

Harm reduction proponents advocate that addiction is a public health problem, not a crime. “We don’t lock up our alcoholics just for being addicted,” Gail points out. Drug users deserve access to education, disease prevention and treatment, just like anyone else. Harm reduction programs and organizations like Witness for Peace can work together to end misguided drug policies and bring dignity back to people in the U.S. and abroad who have suffered needlessly from what is essentially,

a war on our own people.

Learn More:

<http://www.countthecosts.org/>

Sources:

[1] "Policy is Not a Synonym for Justice," by US District Court Judge John L. Kane, Chapter 5 in *The New Prohibition: Voices of Dissent Challenge the Drug War*, Edited by Sheriff Bill Masters, Lonedell, MO: Accurate Press, 2004, p45.

[2] "The War at Home," by Sanho Tree, Institute for Policy Studies. *Soujourner's Magazine*. May-June 2003, p20-42.

[3] Ibid

[4] Source: Baum, Dan. *Smoke and Mirrors: The War on Drugs and the Politics of Failure*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1996.

[5] "Incarceration, Reentry and Social Capital: Social Networks in the Balance," by Dina Rose and Todd Clear. December 2001.

[6] "The War at Home," by Sanho Tree, Institute for Policy Studies. *Soujourner's Magazine*. May-June 2003, p20-42.

[7] "Incarceration, Reentry and Social Capital: Social Networks in the Balance," by Dina Rose and Todd Clear. December 2001.

[8] "The War at Home," by Sanho Tree, Institute for Policy Studies. *Soujourner's Magazine*. May-June 2003, p20-42.