

NATIONAL COUNCIL ON ALCOHOLISM AND DRUG DEPENDENCE – NEW JERSEY
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Survey of candidates finds most see addiction as a public health problem; medical use of marijuana endorsed by 48 percent of office-seekers

TRENTON ... (Oct 17, 2003) – The National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence-New Jersey surveyed the state’s legislative candidates in the Nov. 4 election on addiction issues, finding that nearly 9 of 10 of those running for office here subscribed to the general belief that addiction was a public health matter. On many specific issues, from insurance parity to treating instead of incarcerating non-violent offenders, the candidates’ opinions reflected a public health approach, although few could bring themselves to come out for an increase in the state’s excise tax on alcohol. As for the controversial use of medical marijuana, a matter appealed to U.S. Supreme earlier this week but which the justices declined to hear, not quite half the candidates (47.9 percent) said they were in favor.

John Hulick, director of Public Affairs and Policy with NCADD-NJ, said, “The council is heartened by the clear conviction in favor of a public health approach to addiction by this year’s survey respondents. There is pause to concern, however, when there is not nearly as strong a conviction about the efficacy of treatment by these same respondents. Our public opinion polling demonstrates a similar disconnect. We must continue to educate the public and the legislature about the tremendous success rates when an addicted individual receives an appropriate continuum of care for their illness. Unfortunately, managed care, through its denial and limitations on such care, has created a revolving door of treatment that creates the impression that such treatment is not efficacious.”

An issue that goes to the heart of providing appropriate care is insurance parity, which had the support of 78 percent of the candidates. That was the percentage backing a requirement for all insurance plans contracted to cover addiction to provide inpatient and outpatient treatment on the same level as is offered for other medical services. Slightly less than six of ten respondents (58.9 percent) thought such a measure should include a neutral assessment instrument to determine the proper care level, such as that used by American Society of Addiction Medicine. This is an issue lawmakers may revisit

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when they convene after the election, with companion bills (S-1520, A-2487) currently in the Appropriations Committees of the Senate and the Assembly.

In terms of treating rather than jailing non-violent offenders, the degree of support was in keeping with candidates' overall belief in pursuing public health solutions. Eight in ten of the candidates thought first- and second-time non-violent offenders should have the opportunity to be treated instead of imprisoned. This is mirrored in an Eagleton Institute survey commissioned by NCADD-NJ, which found 90 percent of the public believed non-violent offenders should have an opportunity for treatment instead of jail.

More than half of the candidates (56.2 percent) understood addiction to be an illness that responds to treatment, a majority that said it considered substance abuse to be a preventable and treatable chronic illness comparable to such chronic illnesses as diabetes and asthma. More than half (53.4 percent) said they considered treatment "very effective."

As is often the case in an election, the candidates for the most part distanced themselves from stating outright that they would favor any new taxes, including an increase in the alcohol excise tax. Only 29.1 percent said they would support a tax increase to help deter youth use of alcohol. Two in three candidates did, however, support appropriating a higher percentage of existing alcohol taxes, or the Alcohol Education, Rehabilitation, Enforcement Fund, to expand treatment capacity; 45.2 percent were for appropriating additional general revenue to increase capacity.

The alcohol tax increase was an area where the candidates diverged from the general public, Eagleton's polling showed. A majority of residents (53 percent) of the state support an increase in the alcohol tax, a view that swelled to 65 percent in favor if the new revenue were dedicated to additional treatment and to prevention programs.

This is the third consecutive election in which NCADD-NJ has conducted a candidate survey on addiction issues. As of Oct. 16, NCADD-NJ had received 74 responses, approximately a third of those running for State Senate or Assembly; another 15 replied with letters outlining their positions. The complete survey with individual candidate responses can be accessed at www.ncaddnj.org.

NCADD-NJ has dedicated itself for more than 20 years to educating New Jersey's citizens about alcohol and drug use issues, to advocating on state policies concerning individuals addicted to alcohol or other drugs, and to reducing the stigma that frustrates a public health approach to the disease of addiction.

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