

Commentary

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United States and Sweden Form an Alliance to Support the Swedish; Swedish Drug Policy is a Model for the US and the World

R. Gil Kerlikowske, Director of the United States White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), met with counterdrug officials from Sweden in Mid-March while at the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) in Vienna, Austria to discuss global drug policy.ⁱ This meeting of US and Swedish drug officials exemplified the developing partnership between these two nations which cooperated in a wide range of initiatives at the CND this year.

The Swedish approach to drug policy is an important model for the US and for the world. A strong policy of restriction is balanced with an equally strong concern for public health. Sweden has zero tolerance for the possession, purchase, sale or use of illicit drugs.ⁱⁱ The criminal justice system plays a central role in this strategy with sanctions that are relatively mild and with treatment readily accessible. In treatment programs, drug users are held to the standard of zero tolerance which is enforced by frequent random drug tests. Over the last three decades, this approach to drug policy has achieved remarkable success, including very low rates of illegal drug use. It has enjoyed wide and sustained support in Sweden across a broad political spectrum.

Per Johansson, Secretary of the Board of Directors of the World Federation Against Drugs (WFAD) emphasized in his report from Vienna that most illegal drug users were not addicted and did not need treatment.ⁱⁱⁱ Rather, “they need a reason to stop using and the criminal law is one good reason to stop.” Sweden and the US are working together in a new direction through demand reduction that links the criminal justice system (CJS) and treatment.

Another important area of drug policy widely recognized by the US and Sweden is the need for effective drug prevention. Among the leaders with whom Director Kerlikowske met while in Vienna was Maria Larsson, Minister for Children and the Elderly, representing the Swedish government on drug policy. At the CND meeting, Ms. Larsson stated that Sweden’s position was a “restrictive, mutually reinforcing and balanced approach between drug demand and drug supply reduction, in full compliance with the international drug control conventions.” She stressed that society must protect the most vulnerable population – children and young people – from illicit drugs. Under Article 33 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, UN member states are obligated to protect children from drug abuse, drug production and trafficking. Citing Sweden’s effective drug control strategy, she emphasized the need for prevention programs.

The Institute for Behavior and Health, Inc. (IBH) strongly supports the Swedish model of drug policy. Sweden is the best example of how restrictive policy can be effective in reducing illegal drug use with broad and steady political support for linking treatment and the criminal justice system.

For more information about IBH and drug policy, visit www.ibhinc.org.

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ⁱ Office of National Drug Control Policy. (2011, March 21). White House drug policy director Kerlikowske meets with Swedish counterdrug officials; cites Sweden's drug control policies as model for U.S. Retrieved April 1, 2011 from <http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/news/press11/032111.html>

ⁱⁱ Johansson, P. (2011, March). A historic moment in Vienna – March 2011. Stockholm, Sweden: World Federation Against Drugs. Retrieved April 1, 2011 from <http://wfad.se/latest-news/1-articles/601-a-historic-moment-in-vienna--march-2011>

ⁱⁱⁱ Johansson, P. (2011, March). A historic moment in Vienna – March 2011. Stockholm, Sweden: World Federation Against Drugs. Retrieved April 1, 2011 from <http://wfad.se/latest-news/1-articles/601-a-historic-moment-in-vienna--march-2011>