

Reporting *on***Addiction**

Strategic Plan 2023–2027
Created April 2023

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Executive Summary

Reporting on Addiction is a collaboration between journalists, educators, and addiction science experts, who share a passion for improving journalism's portrayal of addiction and reducing stigma. Journalism plays a vital role in framing and informing local, regional, and national discourse on addiction, shaping the way the public perceives this chronic, treatable disease. With limited education on addiction and the impact of stigmatized language, journalists' stories often do not reflect the complexity of addiction and recovery and rarely present existing solutions to this national crisis. Despite the many evidence-based treatment options available, hundreds of thousands of people are dying from substance use disorder (SUD) every year in the US.

We are on a mission to improve journalists' portrayal of addiction and recovery. We envision a future in which journalists and experts work together to publish addiction stories that are more accurate and empathetic. Journalists must be part of the movement to reduce stigma around addiction, raise awareness of available treatment options, and share stories of hope and recovery.

Launched in 2020 as a partnership between 100 Days in Appalachia and Opioid Policy Institute, Reporting on Addiction provides training, 1:1 support, and online tools to those working in the journalism space. We have created resources, provided 1:1 assistance to journalists, trained newsrooms, educated professors on our curriculum, built a database with expert sources, and shared our message at conferences. Looking ahead, we are excited to build on our successes in order to optimize and scale our solution. We have completed a strategic planning process to inform our actions for 2023-2027. As a result of this deliberate and collaborative process, we have identified four areas that will help us drive our mission forward:

- Empower journalists through training, resources, and 1:1 support to carry out evidence-based, trauma-informed and empathetic addiction reporting.
- Expand our cohort of trained college professors through broader outreach and new engagement models.
- Improve the diversity of our expert coverage to address the complexities of addiction.
- Mobilize collective efforts through research, partnerships, mentorship, and marketing initiatives to increase awareness of the impact of addiction reporting.

We will affect change in each of these areas in order to increase our reach and impact. Our strategic plan is rooted in a commitment to reduce stigma and improve how addiction is portrayed in the news.

Message from Our Leadership

Reporting on Addiction started as a conversation in the summer of 2020 between two journalists and an addiction science expert. We observed the harms of inaccurate and stigmatizing stories on real people who use drugs, are in treatment, and are in recovery, and we wanted to be part of the solution. We believe that by making the media representation of addiction more accurate, empathetic, and human-centered, we can change public perception of addiction and help people access the care they need for this treatable disease. Reporting on Addiction officially launched in the fall of 2021, as a partnership between our organizations.

Our initial work was informed by a thorough review of existing initiatives related to stigma and the media, as well as conversations with addiction experts, community advocates, and journalists. We identified four target audiences where we can affect change: professional journalists, journalism professors and students, experts, and other movements looking to change media coverage of other sensitive topics. We provide training, 1:1 support, and educational resources to these groups, helping to produce stories that use non-stigmatizing language and images, address the complexities of addiction and recovery, and present solutions. We are proud of what we've accomplished thus far and are eager to expand our reach to more communities.

This strategic plan defines our path for the next five years to promote our continued growth and impact. Our strategic plan is guided by our north star outcome: to improve the way addiction is portrayed in the news. We are a small but mighty team with a passion for change. Creating this strategic plan provided us with an opportunity to step back, obtain feedback from the community, and prioritize our plans for the future. We are excited to continue this work and invite you to join us in carrying out our strategy.

Sincerely,

			
<p>Jonathan JK Stoltman, PhD Reporting on Addiction Co-Founder Opioid Policy Institute Director</p>	<p>Ashton Marra, MS Reporting on Addiction Co-Founder 100 Days in Appalachia Executive Editor</p>	<p>Kristen Uppercue, MS Reporting on Addiction Specialist 100 Days in Appalachia Deputy Editor of Special Projects</p>	<p>Mishka Terplan, MD MPH Reporting on Addiction Senior Advisor Friends Research Institute Medical Director</p>

Mission

Our mission is to improve the way that addiction is portrayed in the news, reducing stigma that creates barriers to lifesaving healthcare.

Vision

Through our work, we will improve public perception of addiction by increasing accuracy and empathy in reporting. We envision a future in which media coverage consistently:

1. Lets people know that there is hope, by using our suggested story tag: *“Recovery from addiction is possible. For help, please call the free and confidential treatment referral hotline (1-800-662-HELP) or visit findtreatment.gov.”*
2. Leverages experts from local communities across the nation to help guide reporting to be more reflective of the current science.
3. Discusses the complicated nature of this disease, including the progression and various routes to treatment and recovery.
4. Treats those with substance use disorders as people, by using person-first language, empathetic and trauma-informed reporting methods, and respectful photography and videography.
5. Uses words that do not stigmatize people who use drugs, are in treatment, or are in recovery.
6. Talks about the many barriers to treatment and recovery.

Values

At Reporting on Addiction, our work is guided by five core values:

- **Non-Judgment:** We approach our work from a perspective of understanding and education, knowing that we all do not intend to cause harm and want to be part of the solution.
- **Diversity:** We strive to bring diverse, representative voices to the table, as sources for journalists, advisors on our work, and Reporting on Addiction employees.
- **Science:** Our educational resources and training are rooted in evidence-based research.
- **Curiosity:** We are committed to learning, actively seeking new information to inform our work, and open to new ideas.
- **Collaboration:** Partnerships with journalists, professors, students, and experts through experience and training are essential to our success.

Background

Our country is experiencing a surging and preventable addiction crisis. Today, drug poisoning/overdoses are the leading cause of unintentional injury death in the US.¹ According to CDC provisional data, more than 107,000 people died from drug overdoses in 2021, up 15% from the previous year, primarily by opioids.² In addition, excessive alcohol use is a top contributor to preventable deaths in the US, responsible for more than 99,000 deaths in 2020, up 25.5% from the previous year.³ There are many evidence-based solutions available to both treat SUD and reduce harm from drug use, and yet only 10% of people receive the care they need.⁴

So *why focus on journalists?* We know that the news media plays a vital role in framing and informing local, regional, and national discourse by communicating science to the public. This includes both the dissemination of scientific findings and coverage of public health responses to crises like addiction. Through their coverage, journalists may support or inadvertently conflict with clinical, research, and public health priorities. Media coverage shapes public opinion, which in turn, shapes public policy. When members of the media are uninformed, harmful policy can result.

Unfortunately, journalists' stories often do not reflect the complexity of addiction and recovery, and rarely present existing solutions to this national crisis. Harmful and antiquated beliefs are amplified by journalists, unintentionally contributing to a culture of ignorance and fear surrounding addiction, treatment, and recovery.

We know that journalists do not want to harm their communities; however, they have limited training about addiction science and medicine and thus do not know the widespread harms associated with inaccurate reporting – even when unintentional. We seek to fill this gap and, in doing so, empower journalists to tell more evidence-based and empathetic stories that address the treatment options available and the possibility of recovery. In this way, we will help to shift public opinion of addiction and work to not only cover the crisis but *end* the crisis.

¹ Drug Overdose Deaths,

<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/hus/topics/drug-overdose-deaths.htm#:~:text=Drug%20overdose%20is%20a%20leading,drug%20overdose%20deaths%20in%202019>

² U.S. Overdose Deaths in 2021, https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/nchs_press_releases/2022/202205.htm

³ Deaths involving alcohol increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, [Deaths involving alcohol increased during the COVID-19 pandemic | National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism \(NIAAA\) \(nih.gov\)](https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/deaths-involving-alcohol-increased-during-the-covid-19-pandemic)

⁴ 2019 National Survey on Drug Use and Health,

<https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/reports/rpt29393/2019NSDUHFFRPDFWHTML/2019NSDUHFFR1PDFW090120.pdf>

Value Proposition

Reporting on Addiction provides education, training, 1:1 support, and online tools to those working in the journalism field. We support experienced journalists and editors who are working in professional newsrooms, as well as journalism professors who are working upstream and shaping the way that future reporters write about addiction. By attacking the problem from both directions, we can see faster results and break the cycle of stigma in the news. In support of our work with journalists, we also onboard experts to our database to serve as sources for stories and provide them with coaching as needed. More broadly, we publish our research to raise awareness and support other movements looking to change media coverage of other sensitive topics. Across these four groups, we provide a spectrum of support. Our audiences can engage in many ways:



Professional Journalists

- Participate in newsroom trainings and educational webinars, both live and asynchronous
- Receive assistance for story reporting through 1:1 conversations with our team and Slack forums
- Reference online fact sheets
- Access expert database and image repository



Professors and Students

- Receive training on how to educate students about addiction reporting
- Choose from three tiers of model curriculum, from a week to a month to a full semester
- Receive ongoing 1:1 support from our team and share best practices with other professors via Slack forums
- Connect journalism students with resources



Experts

- Join our expert database to get connected to journalists and talk about their work
- Access online tip sheets on interviews
- Provide 1:1 support to journalists looking to increase their understanding of the issues



Other Movements

- Publish white papers on lessons learned
- Provide mentorship to similar movements focused on improving the way in which sensitive topics are reported

Stakeholders find our work relevant and helpful. Their testimonials show that they find Reporting on Addiction to have “an incredible trove of resources and good experts,” who are “working to make addiction science more translatable and relatable.” We are excited to broaden our reach and bring scale to our solution across the country.

Governance & Funding Sources

Reporting on Addiction is a partnership between the Opioid Policy Institute, a research think tank, and 100 Days in Appalachia, a nonprofit digital news outlet and recipient of the 2021 National Edward R. Murrow award. Fiscal sponsorship for this project is provided by Appalachia Free Press, a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization. Based on our plans, our primary revenue source is grants (private and federal), followed by individual donations and speaker fees.

We have been lucky to be supported by advisors from 100 Days in Appalachia, Opioid Policy Institute, and others in the journalism and addiction fields. As we look to grow, we see value in formally creating a dedicated advisory board that consists of journalists, people with lived experience, addiction science and medicine experts, community advocates, and journalism educators who can steer us towards the goals outlined in this plan. We will establish our dedicated advisory board by 2024.

Strategic Goals

Goals	Actions	Resources Needed
Empower journalists through training, resources, and 1:1 support to carry out evidence-based, trauma-informed and empathetic addiction reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhance our outreach efforts to journalists by connecting with a wider audience across the country (primarily local media organizations and editors), aiming for outreach to 30+ newsrooms per year Train existing and future workforce (8 local news organizations/year, 3 editors/year, 5 professors/year, and 150-200 journalism students/year) on addiction reporting Develop resources related to photography (e.g., dedicated guide, photo repository) in support of empathetic storytelling by 2024 Advance non-stigmatizing and scientific reporting standards by partnering with industry leaders to update the AP Style guide and other private style guides by 2025 Offer alternative engagement models for journalists to learn more and receive support (e.g., Slack channel and optimized chat bot by 2023, warm line to experts by 2024) 	<p>Partnerships with national news organizations with local affiliates</p> <p>Partnerships with news organizations and universities</p> <p>Photographers, photos</p> <p>Partnerships with industry experts to request changes to style guides</p> <p>New staff, technology updates, advisory board</p>

Goals	Actions	Resources Needed
Expand our cohort of trained college professors through broader outreach and new engagement models	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase our outreach to journalism professors, striving to have 15+ professors teaching our curriculum to 150-200 students per year by 2027 Enhance tools and content provided to include tip sheets by 2023, tiered curriculum options by 2024 and videos to enhance self-directed learning by 2025 	<p>Partnerships with universities</p> <p>New staff, content creation</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Create new channels for professors to connect and share best practices, such as a Slack channel by 2023, regular discussion forums by 2023, and mentorship program by 2027 ▪ Extend our outreach to 5 new student newsrooms per year 	<p>Technology updates, program creation</p> <p>Partnerships with professors</p>
<p>Improve the diversity of our expert coverage to address the complexities of addiction</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Expand the quantity and diversity of our expert database, aiming for 150+ by 2027 ▪ Create expert specific content by 2024 to support increased engagement of experts and manage expectations 	<p>Partnerships with ASAM, AATOD, universities</p> <p>Content creation</p>
<p>Mobilize collective efforts through research, partnerships, mentorship, and marketing initiatives to increase awareness of the impact of addiction reporting</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Conduct primary research on addiction coverage to raise awareness on stigma, aiming for one article per year ▪ Create a white paper that outlines our model for similar movements to follow by 2024 ▪ Launch awareness campaigns to promote our efforts ▪ Improve website user experience by 2023 ▪ Leverage our quarterly newsletter and events, such as conferences and open forum meetings, to promote our work ▪ Organize 2026 EOY awards for non-stigmatizing addiction reporting 	<p>Partnerships with university researchers</p> <p>Content creation</p> <p>Partnerships with PR firm</p> <p>New contractor</p> <p>Content creation, logistics for meetings</p> <p>Partnerships with local, state, regional or national media associations</p>

In Closing

The above actions are intended to improve how addiction is depicted in the news. We want to lead this societal change in how addiction is viewed — from a moral failing to a chronic, treatable disease. Reporting on Addiction will empower current and future journalists to use less stigmatizing, more inclusive language and craft stories that present solutions.

We are excited to be sharing our strategic plan and hope that our values have resonated with you. Addiction is a disease that affects millions of real people every day. We believe that the goals, actions, and roadmap laid out here will help us to accomplish our mission of improving the way that addiction is portrayed in the news.

Appendix – Strategic Planning Approach

Our strategic planning process was collaborative and iterative. We engaged a FQA Institute for Social Impact to assist our efforts, starting in October 2022 and finishing in April 2023. Our strategic planning was broken into three main phases – research, workshop discussion, and plan creation.

Our research consisted of an environmental scan and interviews with key stakeholders. As part of the environmental scan, we evaluated 10 similar organizations working on stigma reduction, media education or a combination. Research shows that we have a unique value proposition, in terms of our scope and breadth of roles we are supporting. We also conducted interviews with 16 stakeholders who work in journalism, journalism education, and addiction science. We received helpful feedback on potential new tools, the importance of collaboration, and the need to raise awareness of our solution more broadly.

Informed by the environmental scan and interview takeaways, we held a series of workshops to align on our strategic plan. We started by discussing who we want to be in five years, refining our target market, scope, and intended impact. Then, we compared our current state to future state, and identified actions to fill the gaps between today and 2027, being thoughtful about interdependencies and feasibility. These discussions provided an invaluable opportunity to step back and align on the path ahead.

After the workshops, we created this strategic plan, as well as a detailed implementation plan. We defined measures of success at the level of goals and specific actions which will help hold us accountable and guide our path. We have clear objectives to strive towards as we grow our organization over the next five years and beyond.