

## Fight back! Drug User Unions: How drug users are working together for their rights

**“Now it is time to raise our voices as citizens, establish our rights and reclaim the right to be our own spokespersons striving for self-representation and self-empowerment.”**

- The Vancouver Declaration, 4/30/2006, The International Activists who use Drugs, Vancouver Canada

### What is a “Drug User Union” (DUU)?

People who use drugs are best able to identify what works in their community - a community that others know little about.

**Drug user unions *band together for connection, protection, and to change systems that control and punish people who use drugs.*** They provide opportunities to make changes on social, legal, and health issues that impact drug users. Similar to labor unions, drug user unions work together to solve a problem that members of the group are facing. They can connect you to resources, provide a space to talk about your use, and opportunities for strengthening the rights of people who use drugs like you. **Drug user unions recognize the expertise of people who use drugs and put the power in their hands.**

### What does this mean for me?

*For people who use drugs, it might mean challenging drug laws, education about safe use, and fighting social stigma.*

There's power in numbers when people who use drugs come together for their rights. Some drug users find they like to be leaders, feel like they found a new direction in life, joined a community that supports & understands them, and a way to help improve the rights of all drug users.

- Being involved with drug user unions can help you build a range of skills and gain confidence to benefit other aspects of your life. Drug user unions can help members receive education, training, or employment.
- User organizing through DUU's can provide governments, programs (like NEXT), and the community with a 'drug user perspective' on issues like drug use, sex work, police surveillance & more.

### What it can look like:

They can be connected to a larger organization like VOCAL-NY, national teams with chapters like USUU, or independent local groups.

- Some groups may work more on national or local law change while others focus more on mutual aid and direct service. Connecting with them (online or in person) may provide opportunities for honest conversations about drug use with understanding and knowledgeable folks.



### A new type of drug user union

**Drug User Liberation Front (DULF) uses an unsanctioned community-based type approach called a compassion club to buy and test drugs purchased off of the dark net for distribution and to ensure a safe supply. They distribute cocaine, heroin, and meth in these packages after drug testing and repackaging for reduced cost.**

- Canada

Learn more about DULF & compassion clubs here: <https://www.dulf.ca/resources>

### Drug User Unions in the United States

All drug user unions function differently and it depends on the individual and collective needs of the members of the group.

#### Drug user led

- **National (U.S.) Urban Survivor's Union (NUSU)** - A national drug user union made up of both former and active drug users with self-led chapters throughout the country whose purpose is to grow community organizing groups. Fight for the rights of drug users at a national level, provides organizing support to chapters, and uplifts the importance of user run/community led services. Anyone interested is welcome to their biweekly calls.

Visit: [nurbansurvivorunion.org/national-usu/](http://nurbansurvivorunion.org/national-usu/)

- **North Carolina Urban Survivor Union (NCUSU)** - leading and founding group of the National Urban Survivor's Union based out of North Carolina.

### As part of another organization

- **Voices Of Community Activists & Leaders (VOCAL-NY)** - An established non-profit with an active drug user union. Their drug policy goals are led by their Drug User Union and includes ensuring universal access to harm reduction services and drug treatment, ending overdose deaths, and reducing and eliminating criminal justice involvement for people who use drugs.

Learn more: [www.vocal-ny.org/](http://www.vocal-ny.org/) or @VOCALNewYork on Twitter

### Region-specific

- **New England User's Union (NEUU)** - New England (Includes Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode

Island) - A self-organized group of people who use drugs working together to stay alive, fight drug use stigma, and help each other develop their own skills and speak up within their communities Visit: [facebook.com/NewEnglandUsersUnion/](https://facebook.com/NewEnglandUsersUnion/)

## Providing services in their community

- **Seattle People's Harm Reduction Alliance** - a user run exchange in Seattle.  
Learn more: <https://phra.org/>

## History of Drug User Unions

Drug user unions have been around for over 40 years. The first drug user union, the Rotterdam Junkie Union (RJB), started in Rotterdam, Netherlands in 1977. Their goal was to organize people who use drugs to protect and defend the health and human rights of their community.

In the early '90s, Canada's Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU) was formed in response to the HIV crisis and overdoses among people who use drugs.

The first drug user union in the U.S., called the Committee of Concerned Methadone Patients and Friends Inc., was formed in 1973 by methadone patients who advocated for patients in drug treatment programs.

## Drug User Unions around the World

### Canada

**Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU)** - VANDU focuses on demarginalization of drug users and uplifting their voices. They host organized events in memory of people who use drugs who died of overdoses, intercepted a city council meeting to protest for harm reductions services, and they've opened a peer-run safer injection site in response to police crackdowns to harm reduction programs.

Visit: <https://vandureplace.wordpress.com/>

### Worldwide list & community of PWUD in 9 world regional networks

**International People Who Use Drugs (INPUD)** is a global network that seeks to represent people who use drugs in international agencies such as the United Nations and with those undertaking international development work.

Visit: <http://www.inpud.net/>

## What can drug user unions in the US accomplish?

The VOCAL-NY DUU is currently working on passing laws that decriminalize low-level drug possession, reduce barriers to buprenorphine access, and authorize an overdose prevention site (also known as a safe consumption site, drug consumption site, or safe use site) in New York.

NEUU members support people who use drugs by showing up to court cases for support, run informal syringe exchanges out of their homes, and give overdose response training. NEUU also works as a support group where people who use drugs talk about their drug use and have a safe, confidential space to share expertise and talents.

## Call to action

- Join an existing drug user union or start your own!
- Tell NEXT how drug users want to be heard! See the attached flyer for info about a paid survey for NEXT Distro Participants that asks about how PWUD want to be involved with participant advisory boards, another way that current and former people who use drugs can have their needs heard.

## For more information:

- This list created by NCUSU, provides a list of unions from all around the world. There are online and in-person groups you can join, & you can always start your own.  
Visit: [ncurbansurvivorunion.org/greensboro-urban-survivors-union/drug-user-unions/](https://ncurbansurvivorunion.org/greensboro-urban-survivors-union/drug-user-unions/)
- A 10-episode podcast series by Drugreporter and the International Network of People who Use Drugs (INPUD) about how drug user unions have organized to protect and defend the health and human rights of their community around the world.  
Visit: <https://tinyurl.com/DUUpodcast>
- **The Vancouver Declaration**; A manifesto about why the world needs an international network of activists who use drugs. *Read it here:* [inpud.net/vancouver-declaration/](https://inpud.net/vancouver-declaration/)
- **We ARE the People: Drug User Organizing in the United States**; a documentary about five drug user unions in the United States and how they fight stigma related to drug use and the War on Drugs that maintains it. *Watch it here:* [vimeo.com/95458907](https://vimeo.com/95458907)
- Check out [nextdistro.org/socialsupport](https://nextdistro.org/socialsupport) for more ways to find other people who use drugs (not professionals like doctors or therapists), support, or just a listening ear.
- Visit the NEXT Distro resource page on drug user unions: [nextdistro.org/druguserunions](https://nextdistro.org/druguserunions)