



# **Continuing the Fight: Preventing Opioid Addiction in America**

**April 17, 2024**

**Washington Marriot at Metro Center | Washington, DC**

# Executive Summary

On April 17th, in the midst of Congressional consideration of the SUPPORT Act and in the aftermath of the enactment of the Non-Opioids Prevent Addiction in the Nation (“NOPAIN”) Act, Voices for Non-Opioid Choices (“Voices”) hosted its annual advocates’ gathering to map the Coalition’s path forward.

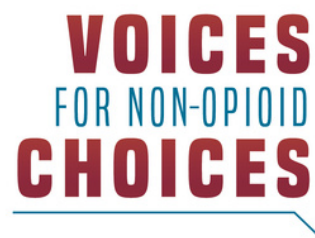
The event, entitled “Continuing the Fight: Preventing Opioid Addiction in America”, brought together leaders in public health, patient advocacy, and clinical societies to highlight opportunities to continue our collaboration in preventing opioid addiction in America. Individuals and families impacted by the opioid addiction crisis shared their stories of how addiction has impacted them and their own struggles with opioids and recovery.

The breakfast keynote address was provided by Representative Mariannette Miller-Meeks from Iowa. Representative Miller-Meeks is an ophthalmologist and serves on the House Energy and Commerce and Veterans’ Affairs Committees. Additionally, Representative Miller-Meeks is the architect of the Alternatives to Prevent Addiction in the Nation (“Alternatives to PAIN”) Act (H.R. 7142), which she introduced earlier this year with Representative Tony Cardenas from California.



Rep. Miller-Meeks (R-IA) delivers the keynote address.

The Alternatives to PAIN Act is a piece of federal legislation that seeks to prevent unnecessary exposure to prescription opioids by ensuring that Medicare Part D plan beneficiaries can access non-opioid pain approaches at the pharmacy counter without excessive cost sharing or other administrative burdens. A companion piece (S. 3832) was later introduced in the Senate by Senators Thom Tillis of North Carolina and Mark Kelly of Arizona.



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National experts then provided their views on the current state of the opioid addiction crisis. Opioid-related drug overdose deaths remain at all-time highs, with prescription opioids continuing to play a role. Much of the public discourse around opioid addiction centers around illicit forms of opioids, including heroin, fentanyl and zylazine; however, estimates from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) show that more than 20 percent of all opioid-related drug overdose deaths last year involved prescription opioids. All told, we lose 55 Americans to a prescription opioid-related overdose **every day.**

Throughout the day, participants learned about the medical side of treating pain. Clinicians – including anesthesiologists and those representing nurse practitioners – spoke about their work to combat the opioid addiction crisis.

Speakers discussed how the pain treatment landscape needed to change. United States pain management practices and use of opioid-based analgesia remains unaligned with pain management in other countries, including in the European Union. Clinicians explained why this was the case: healthcare professionals are, for the most part, trained to treat pain with prescription opioids and generic medicines are universally covered by health insurance plans. Moving forward, speakers noted, modernizing pain management in the country would be needed to pivot away from antiquated approaches that prioritize opioids.



Clinicians discuss the medical side of treating pain.

To level-set the conversation and underscore the work that Voices does every day, a panel presented personal anecdotes of addiction, loss, and recovery. Individuals spoke about their own struggles with addiction, the empowerment they felt from recovery, and the grief they carry today from the loss of a loved one. These anecdotes underscore the importance of the work that Voices does and what needs to be done moving forward.

From these discussions, two themes emerged and highlighted ongoing needs for Voices' consideration. First, significant discussion focused on the importance of the NOPAIN Act and how it will lead to significantly enhanced access to non-opioids beginning in 2025. However, the NOPAIN Act is targeted at Medicare beneficiaries on the outpatient surgical setting. Others – including veterans and those served by Medicare Part D – also need access to non-addictive pain management approaches. At this point, the discussion pivoted to how Voices could serve these populations and ensure that they too would enjoy enhanced access to non-opioid pain approaches in 2025 and beyond.

Participants learned of the challenges that veterans and active-duty service members face when accessing non-opioid pain approaches. One speaker discussed her personal struggles with addiction after being given opioids to manage postsurgical pain following an injury incurred during service. Others noted that changes to Medicare policy do not always flow through to health plans covering veterans and active-duty service members.



Veteran Kim Robbins discusses her personal struggles with addiction.

So while Medicare beneficiaries having outpatient surgery procedures may enjoy enhanced access to non-opioids beginning in 2025, the same may not be true for those served by TRICARE or with VA health benefits.

Other communities impacted by the opioid addiction crisis include older Americans. The opioid addiction crisis is commonly misunderstood to be solely focused on younger Americans. However, as participants heard, older Americans are increasingly impacted and rates of opioid use disorder are increasing among these communities. In fact, 1.1 million Medicare beneficiaries were diagnosed with an opioid use disorder in 2022. Participants learned why this is the case as these individuals tend to be heavy utilizers of healthcare resources – including more frequently requiring surgeries, more regular physician office visits.

Finally, participants learned about Voices' advocacy efforts moving forward. This discussion focused on four key pillars:

- I. Ensuring effective roll-out of the NOPAIN Act beginning in 2025.
- II. Ensuring Veterans have access to non-opioid pain approaches.
- III. Providing unfettered access to non-opioids under Medicare Part D.
- IV. Facilitating enhanced clinician awareness around non-opioid pain management approaches.

The final panel spoke about key questions that officials at the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services may be discussing in anticipation of the NOPAIN Act. These definitional questions will determine which products will qualify for separate reimbursement under the law as well as the amount of the additional payment available. Participants also learned of Congressional interest in facilitating access to non-opioids under Medicare Part D.

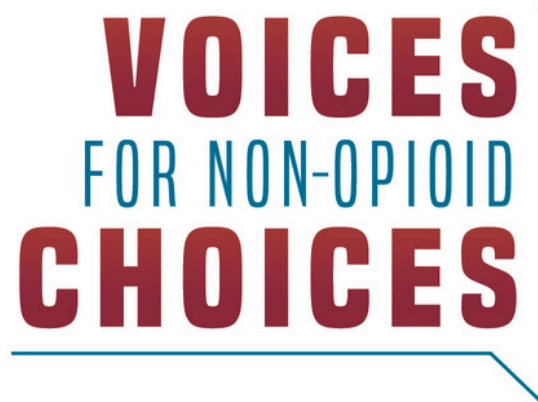
Speakers from Senator Mark Kelly and Representative Miller-Meeks' offices discussed the legislation and implored help securing additional support for the Alternatives to PAIN Act.

All told, participants were able to again celebrate the success of their previous advocacy in support of the NOPAIN Act, but also lean in on needed next steps. As they heard, the problem persists and much work – and advocacy – will be required in the weeks and months ahead as Voices continues its fight.



Capitol Hill insiders discuss dynamics at CMS and in Congress.

The work of Voices will not stop until all Americans in all settings regardless of insurance types or status have a choice in managing their pain.



For more information on Voices for Non-Opioid Choices, please visit [www.nonopioidchoices.org](http://www.nonopioidchoices.org)