

How Does Clinical Psychedelic Research Support Human Rights?

JENNIFER NEAR



Jennifer Near

AT THE LIBRA FOUNDATION, WE believe that all people are born with equal and inalienable rights and fundamental freedoms, that they have a right to live in a healthy environment, and in a just and equitable society that values dignity, equality and participation. One of the greatest barriers to ensuring these rights and freedoms of all peoples, particularly in low-income communities and communities of color, are the punitive policies that have stemmed from the United States' "war on drugs" and prohibition. Therefore, The Foundation works to advance human rights through supporting targeted reforms in the U.S. criminal justice system, and changes in domestic and international drug policies.

In accordance with The Libra Foundation's human rights mission, vision and values, changes in drug policy are based on the recognition of the harms caused by prohibitionist policies and criminalized solutions to problems that are fundamentally social and economic. To strengthen human rights, Libra funds leading organizations working on legalization, decriminalization, clinical trials for re-classification of illegal drugs, patient rights, harm reduction, and models for diversion. The Foundation also works to promote greater awareness of drug policy issues among social justice advocates working on economic and racial justice, criminal justice, prison and sentencing reform, civil liberties, and immigration. This awareness regarding the connection between current drug policies and human rights, encourages these organizations to include strategies in their work that help reduce the harms and impacts of the drug war on their constituents.

The "war on drugs" has infiltrated the United States legal and medical systems and has been destructive to the fulfillment of human rights and to the provision of health care. The criminalization of drugs has framed the public's perception of drugs as "dangerous" illegal substances, and identifies the people who use them as criminals that should be "treated" in our prisons, not in our health care system. It also blurs the distinction between individuals who have substance abuse problems, and those using illegal substances for medicinal use. From the Foundation's perspective, access to treatment options, be it psychedelics or medical marijuana, is a human right. Ill-informed policies with a political agenda should not be the basis for medical treatment in our country.

The Foundation's support for MAPS' work on Federal Drug Administration (FDA) approved trials for re-classification of illegal drugs is a critical component of our drug policy priority area. MAPS' research successfully demonstrates the benefits for the therapeutic uses of psychedelics; persuasively educates the public by providing accurate information; creates support for the medicinal value of certain "illegal" substances; and challenges fears that are the premise of the public's support for punitive, prohibition-based drug policies. As MAPS' Phase 2 studies continue to make significant advance-

ments, they bring the drug policy reform conversation to new platforms, and shift the current paradigms on what should or should not be classified as an illegal or prescribed substance.

There is much work to be done to move away from the draconian approach of the drug war to a human rights approach. Clinical trials are an important way to demonstrate that current drug policies are not fact based. As MAPS removes the stigma and judgment from psychedelics while demonstrating their medicinal value, they re-humanize the individuals that take these substances. This is a critical cultural shift to achieving the human rights of all citizens in our country and to developing harm reduction and reason based approaches to drug policy. Betsy Brill, the Executive Director of The Libra Foundation, acknowledges that the Foundation's grant to MAPS is critical to the goals of the Foundation. Ms. Brill writes:

“Access to the appropriate and effective medical treatment is a human right, this should not be denied as a result of political interests to criminalize certain drugs. At the same time, the current drug classifications disproportionately violate the human rights of minority and low-income populations. MAPS' work seeking FDA approval bridges these two critical issues that have come out of the U.S. Drug War.”



The universal human rights logo.

Although there are powerful political and corporate interests that have a vested interest in the criminal justice system, there is growing public interest in de-criminalization. MAPS and other drug policy reformers are successfully providing scientific evidence that exposes the fallacies of fear-based policies. During this momentous time, it is critical that The Foundation and other funders continue to challenge punitive policies that marginalize the individual, and embrace harm reduction strategies that treat drug users as humans with inalienable rights, and who are able to choose their medical treatment with the counsel of medical professionals. Finally, the field must continue work to support organizations, like MAPS, that are increasing the public's support for a new era of drug policies and that pave the way for making all of these reforms possible. ●

Jennifer Near is a Senior Program Officer at The Libra Foundation. The Libra Foundation's mission is to advance human rights domestically and abroad, with a priority focus on women's rights, environmental sustainability, social justice and drug policy reform. The Foundation's Drug Policy Priority Theory of Change, states that a realistic end to the "war on drugs" be based on the recognition of the harms caused by prohibitionist policies and militarized solutions to fundamentally social and economic problems, and on the implementation of health-based approaches to substance abuse problems.