

Radical Hope: working as a movement to win

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Introduction:

Advocacy for drug law reform happens within complex environments and contexts shaped by political caution (due to electoral backlash anxiety), a fast-moving media landscape, public stigma and fear, sector fragmentation and competing priorities and other global pressures. While many in our sector often share aspirations for better laws, policies and systems for people who use drugs, our efforts to get there can be disconnected or reactive. This workshop examines how strategic, movement-building approaches can strengthen efforts to shift power and authority and increase motivation of decision makers to enact the changes we want.

Using the lead-up to the 2024 NSW Drug Summit as a case study, the workshop will explore how the Fair Treatment campaign and partners navigated tension, sector cynicism, shifts in momentum and lack of consultation from Government to find and create moments to leverage to win real outcomes for drug law reform and investment in treatment. The workshop will explore how various levers for change were used to influence public discourse and the structure and agenda of the Summit itself.

Method and approach:

This workshop uses a practice-based systems change and reflective case study methodology, drawing on campaign documentation, strategic reflections, advocacy evaluation processes and lived campaign experiences from Fair Treatment campaign efforts between 2023–2025. Facilitators will map key campaign phases, strategic pivots and advocacy “fields of play”, including inside-track advocacy, grassroots organising, narrative strategy, media engagement and coalition-building.

Participants will have the opportunity for breakout group activities to explore concepts such as:

- movement-building versus individual organisational advocacy;
- identifying shared values and common purpose;
- power and context analysis - navigating pauses, pivots and political timing;
- balancing ambitious reform goals with pragmatic advocacy opportunities; and
- maintaining hope and high expectations in a slow-moving and sometime stigmatizing reform environment

Key Findings:

Key lessons emerging from this work include the importance of sustained coalition infrastructure, strategic adaptability, consistent and ongoing analysis of power, and shared narrative discipline in maintaining momentum for reform. The campaign demonstrated that hope and high expectations can function as strategic assets within systems that often normalise incrementalism and lowered expectations. Experiences leading to the NSW Drug Summit also highlighted the importance of broadening campaign ownership by elevating diverse voices, including peer workers, faith leaders, clinicians and regional communities.

Discussions and Conclusions:

The workshop argues that durable drug policy reform requires stronger movement ecosystems capable of coordinating across sectors while maintaining flexibility, trust and shared purpose. The NSW Drug Summit provides an opportunity to reflect not only on policy reform outcomes, but on the advocacy conditions required to sustain long-term systems change.

Implications on communities, practice, policy and/or First Nations communities:

This workshop offers practical insights for advocates, researchers, peer workers, clinicians and policymakers seeking to strengthen collaborative reform efforts within the AOD space. It highlights the importance of leadership of people with lived and living experience, diversity of voices and perspectives being showcased, cross-sector alignment and strategic coordination to make progress.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

Uniting has no conflicts of interest to disclose.