FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
December 2, 2013
Contact: Desiree Evans
Phone: 504-301-0428
Email: desiree@wwav-no.org

Southern Harm Reduction Conference Comes to New Orleans
Local and National Groups Gather to Shine a Light on Drug Policy in the U.S. South

NEW ORLEANS, LA - From December 12-13, 2013, New Orleans-based Women With a Vision, Inc. (WWAV) along with the North Carolina Harm Reduction Coalition (NCHRC) will be hosting the 2013 Southern Harm Reduction and Drug Policy Conference at the Hyatt Regency in New Orleans.

The conference, subtitled Working with the Red (Republican Allies, Blood and Heart), will bring together nonprofit organizations, advocacy groups, policy makers, public health officials, and concerned citizens from across the South and the nation, alongside Southern politicians and law enforcement officers, to discuss harm reduction and drug policy and its implications for Southern communities.

As NCHRC's Executive Director Robert Childs, MPH, states, "There is no better time than now to address the implications of drug policy in Southern states, as skyrocketing rates of HIV/AIDS, hepatitis and overdoses continue to have a severe impact across the region."

The local host organization, WWAV, has been raising awareness about the reality of drug use and drug policy in New Orleans for more than two decades. By calling for better public policies such as legalizing syringe exchange programs, WWAV is helping to reduce HIV rates and save lives. "We are harm reductionists and human rights advocates," says Deon Haywood, Executive Director of Women With a Vision. "In New Orleans we stand beside some of the city's most marginalized residents – drug users, sex workers, and low-income communities – in calling for a public health approach to addressing the needs of our communities in ways that don't encourage further stigmatization and criminalization, but instead support saving lives and furthering human rights."

Currently WWAV is spreading information about how drug overdoses can be prevented and collecting stories to support the passage of 911 Good Samaritan laws. If passed in Louisiana, it could encourage witnesses of an overdose to call emergency services without fear of legal repercussions. "We need a 911 Good Samaritan law in Louisiana," Haywood says, explaining that people witnessing an overdose often don't call 911 because they fear being arrested. "We need them because they can save lives."

The movement for policies like Good Samaritan immunity laws will be discussed at the conference, as well as the work being done across the region to curb the spread of HIV/AIDS. Injection drug use remains one of the leading causes of HIV/AIDS transmission, and Louisiana has some of the highest HIV/AIDS rates in the nation. As a region, the South has the highest prevalence of people living with AIDS, AIDS deaths, and new AIDS diagnosis in the United States. Advocates will discuss how syringe decriminalization and other evidenced-based interventions could have a major impact on curbing rates in Louisiana and across the South.
"The Southern Harm Reduction and Drug Policy Conference is part of a growing movement in the South that says we value the lives and health of drug users, sex workers, prisoners, and others whom public health has forgotten," says Megan McLemore, a senior researcher for Human Rights Watch.

McLemore authored a forthcoming report, which documents the devastating effects of the lack of health and harm reduction services for drug users in New Orleans. The report, entitled *In Harm's Way: State Response to Sex Workers, Drug Users and HIV in New Orleans*, will be released Friday morning of the conference and is based on interviews with nearly 200 people in New Orleans. As the report summarizes, "Some of the highest HIV infection and death rates in the United States are found in southern states such as Louisiana, where deep poverty combines with harmful laws and policies that increase risk of acquiring, transmitting and dying of HIV."

Conference organizers are encouraging public officials, health and service providers, community organizations, and all interested community members to see the conference as an opportunity to learn more about harm reduction and drug policy reform work in New Orleans, the South and across the nation.

**WHAT:** Southern Harm Reduction and Drug Policy Conference  
**WHO:** Hosted by Women With a Vision and the North Carolina Harm Reduction Coalition  
**WHEN:** Thurs., Dec. 12th from 9:00am-6:00pm; Fri., Dec. 13th from 8:00am-6:00pm  
**WHERE:** Hyatt Regency, 601 Loyola Avenue, New Orleans, LA, 70113

For further information on this event or related topics, or to schedule an interview with Women With a Vision and other conference organizers, please call 504-301-0428 or send an email to desiree@wwav-no.org.

#

Founded in 1991, **Women With A Vision, Inc.** (WWAV) is a community-based non-profit working to improve the lives of marginalized women, their families, and communities by addressing the social conditions and punitive policies that hinder their health and well-being. WWAV accomplishes this through relentless advocacy, health education, supportive services, and community-based participatory research. [www.wwav-no.org](http://www.wwav-no.org)

The **North Carolina Harm Reduction Coalition** (NCHRC) is North Carolina's only comprehensive harm reduction program. NCHRC engages in grassroots advocacy, resource development, coalition building and direct services for those made vulnerable by drug use, sex work, overdose, immigration status, gender, STIs, HIV and hepatitis. NCHRC also provides resources and support to the law enforcement, public health and provider communities. [www.nchrc.org](http://www.nchrc.org)