



Guidance for Using Non-Stigmatizing Imagery for Substance Use Disorders and Justice Involvement



ABOUT THIS REPORT

Addiction Policy Forum created this report with support from the Justice Community Overdose Innovation Network (JCOIN). The publication includes recommendations informed by interviews with individuals in recovery from substance use disorders and who have had justice involvement.

This report is based on the findings from the following publication:

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PUBLICATIONS

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UNDERSTANDING STIGMA

Stigma results from a social process where certain marks are constructed as indicators of a tarnished character. In turn, these features are used to justify discrimination toward and power loss of people with that mark (Goffman, 1963).

According to Dr. Valerie Earnshaw at the University of Delaware,

“Stigma manifests itself structurally, through societal conditions and social norms; through individual perceivers, those who discriminate or perpetuate stereotypes of the stigma; and through individual targets, those living with the stigmatized characteristic.”

In the case of substance use disorder (SUD), individuals with SUD who experience stigma are more likely to continue engaging in substance use, potentially as a way to cope with the stigma they are facing (Tsai et al., 2019). Stigma serves to create barriers to treatment access and higher rates of treatment dropout (Corrigan et al., 2006). For individuals experiencing stigma related to criminal justice involvement, greater psychological distress and decreased self-esteem (Turney et al., 2013), and greater social isolation are present (Moore et al., 2016).

Interventions to address stigma have shown to be effective in other disease spaces such as HIV and mental illness, and can be applied to SUD. Dr. Ben Howell (Yale University) explains:

“While criminal justice and substance use stigma are deeply ingrained in our society, there are several means of intervention. When policies are created around stigma structurally, there are positive outcomes at the individual level. Perceivers of stigma also hold the power to intervene, by continuing contact with stigmatized individuals, framing their language in a non-stigmatizing way and educating themselves.”

References

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CHANGING IMAGERY

Modifying imagery and language used to describe and represent individuals with a substance use disorder or criminal justice involvement is an intervention that researchers, institutions, and other perceivers can implement. Stigmatizing imagery can contribute to the stereotypes of addiction and potentially trigger trauma or relapse among individuals in recovery from a substance use disorder or who have involvement in the justice system.

This publication details recommendations for images to use and images to avoid in publications and materials. The guidance in this publication is informed by a focus group conducted by JCOIN's Coordination and Translation Center (CTC) in December 2020, and interviews with individuals with lived experience with substance use disorder and criminal justice involvement.

ABOUT JCOIN

Led by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) and funded through the NIH HEAL InitiativeSM, JCOIN is a groundbreaking initiative designed to advance scientific knowledge on effective policies, practices, and interventions, and expand their use into daily practice within health and justice settings.

Learn more about JCOIN at www.jcoinctc.org.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Imagery Recommendations

Law Enforcement.....	5
Courts and Judicial.....	7
Prisons and Jails.....	9
Reentry, Probation, and Parole.....	11
Treatment and Medical Settings.....	13
Individuals with Substance Use Disorder.....	15
Types of Substance Use Disorders.....	17
Recovery.....	20
Peer Support and Lived Experience Leadership.....	22
Housing and Stability.....	24
Employment and Purpose.....	26
Family and Community Connection.....	28

The background of the entire page is a blurred photograph of police lights. In the bottom left corner, a police car's roof and a flashing white light are visible. The rest of the image is a bokeh of blue, red, and yellow light spots, suggesting an emergency scene at night.

LAW ENFORCEMENT



LAW ENFORCEMENT IMAGERY

When building materials for law enforcement-related content, consider the following guidance.

Imagery to Use

- Photos of police cars, sirens, or police stations without individuals in frame
- Include a police officer without other individuals in the image

Imagery to Avoid

- People being arrested, in handcuffs, or in altercations with police

"Anyone in handcuffs—that's not their best day. It's not the right way to portray individuals going into the criminal justice system or with substance use disorders."

- Individual with Lived Experience





COURTS

COURTS AND JUDICIAL IMAGERY

"The pictures and the imagery send a whole other negative message and triggers a lot of emotions around unfair sentencing and unfair representation."

- Individual with Lived Experience

Imagery to Use

- Empty courtrooms
- A gavel
- The scales of justice

Imagery to Avoid

- People in courtrooms and individuals in handcuffs
- A judge, district attorney, or other professional with defendants in the image



PRISONS AND JAILS



PRISON AND JAIL IMAGERY

Imagery to Use

- Empty common areas, cafeterias, or prison libraries
- A modern cell without bars
- Individuals in classrooms and vocational trainings

Imagery to Avoid

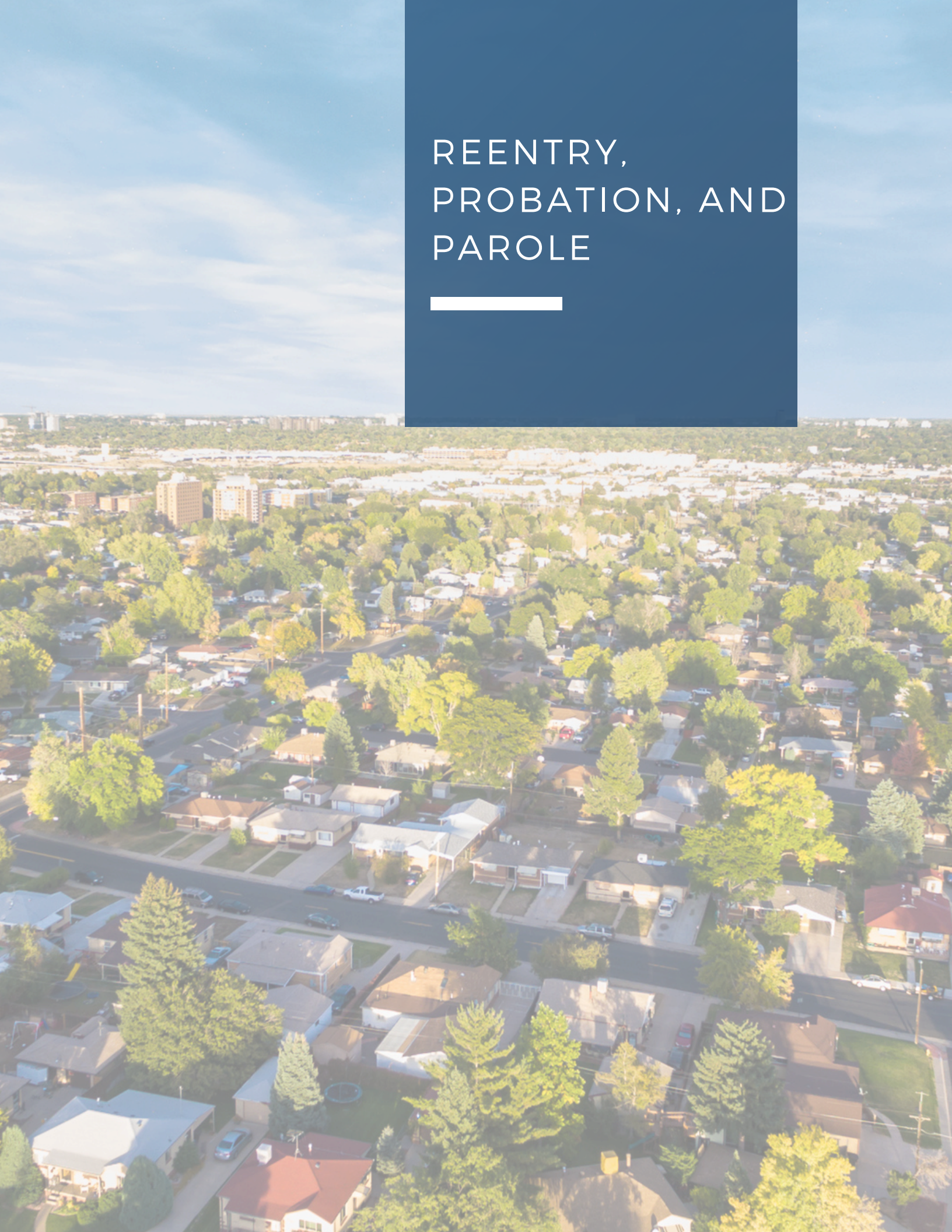
- Bars and rows of cells
- Individuals behind bars or in jumpsuits
- Hands on bars
- Images that include barbed wire

"There's just something really brutal about the rows and rows [of cells], it's pretty dehumanizing."

- Individual with Lived Experience



REENTRY, PROBATION, AND PAROLE



REENTRY, PROBATION, AND PAROLE IMAGERY

The broad scope of services and personnel for reentry, probation, and parole can cover a variety of images from reentry into the community to case management and participant engagement.

Imagery to Use

- Roads, pathways, and landscapes of the community with hopeful coloring
- Doors opening with a hopeful theme
- Abstract images of the community
- Community activities and employment-focused imagery

Imagery to Avoid

- Jumpsuits, handcuffs, and images that reflect despair

“The imagery of walking from the darkness into the light as a transition of reentry— always utilize that. From hopelessness to hope; that's what reentry should be.”

- Individual with Lived Experience



A photograph of a medical setting featuring a silver stethoscope with grey tubing resting on a white spiral-bound notebook. A blue pen lies horizontally behind the stethoscope. The scene is brightly lit, creating soft shadows. A dark blue rectangular overlay is positioned in the upper right corner, containing the title text and a white horizontal line.

TREATMENT AND MEDICAL SETTINGS

TREATMENT AND MEDICAL IMAGERY

Treatment and medical images should depict wellness, health, and positive treatment experiences to reinforce themes of new beginnings and health.

Imagery to Use

- Stethoscopes, medical icons, external and internal photos of a hospital without patients present
- Medical professionals interacting with patients without revealing patients' faces
- Images including nature and landscape

Imagery to Avoid

- Individuals who look like they are struggling in treatment, receiving treatment as a negative experience, or who resemble private treatment websites
- Imagery that conveys a lack of interest in treatment



INDIVIDUALS WITH A SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER



IMAGERY OF INDIVIDUALS WITH A SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER

Portrayal of individuals with a substance use disorder should be positive and hopeful. Imagery recommendations for individuals with substance use disorder include:

Imagery to Use

- Using photos of holding hands
- Individuals in a circle to illustrate group therapy or mutual aid support groups

Imagery to Avoid

- Any image with substances in the frame, or any image that indicates hopelessness or sadness

“I love the hand holding because I think it communicates if you're talking about patient services treatment, it communicates what we actually do to help people get to where they need to be.”

- Individual with Lived Experience



TYPES OF SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER

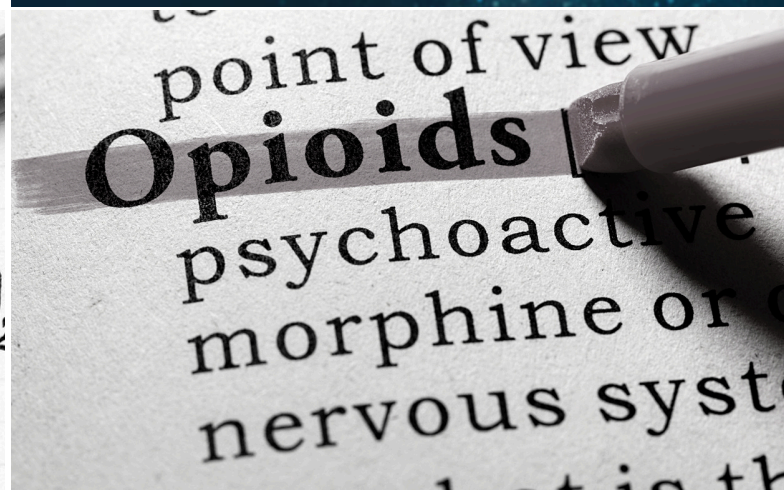
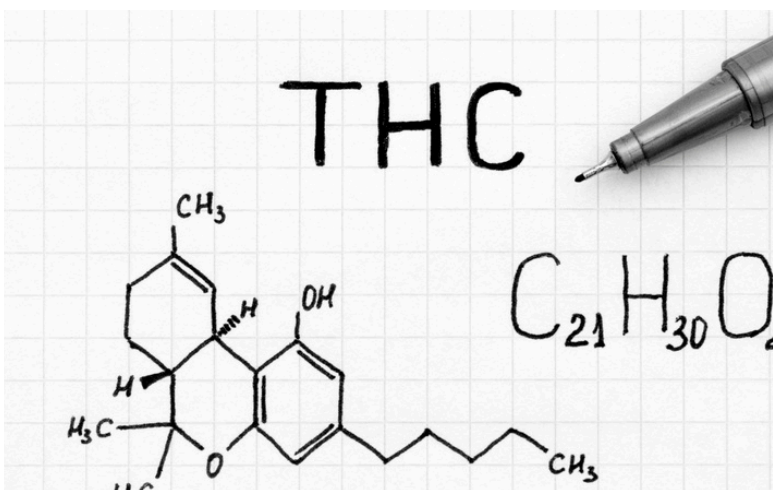
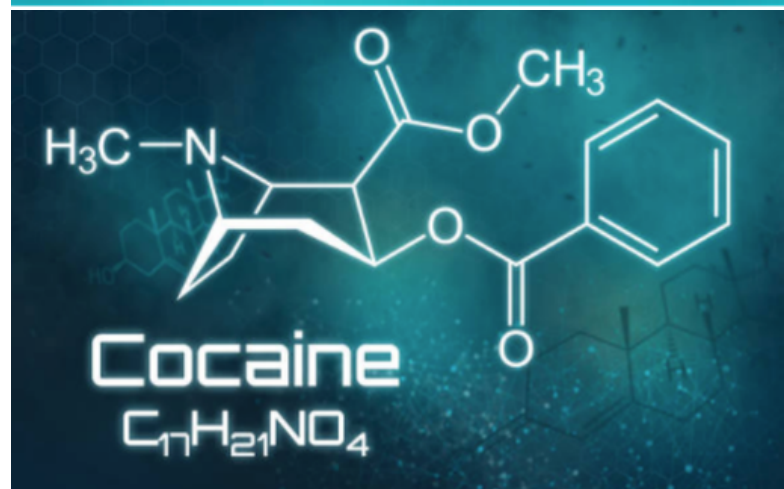
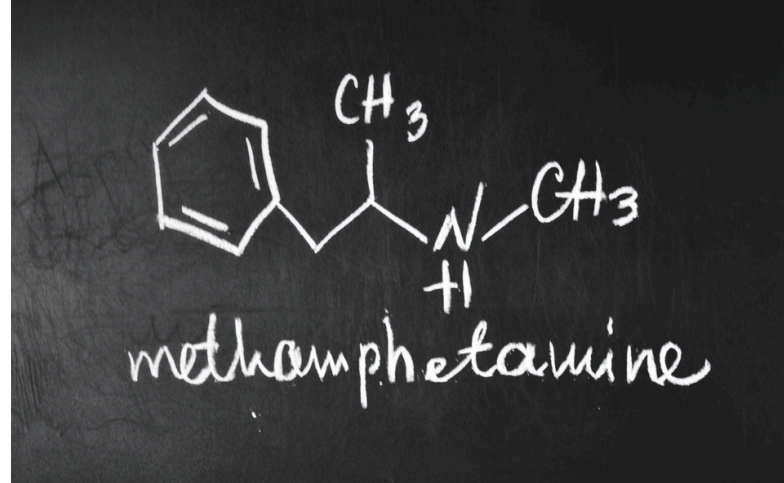
...ain relief
...suppress
...r, rever
...essing opioid
...ds such as carfentanil
Opioids are
...r euphoric effect

IMAGERY OF TYPES OF SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS

Much of the imagery used to identify different types of substance use disorders (opioid use disorder, stimulant use disorder, alcohol use disorder) can be both triggering and stigmatizing. Recommended images include conceptual options, molecular symbols, or definitions from the dictionary that demonstrate the type of substance.

Imagery to Use

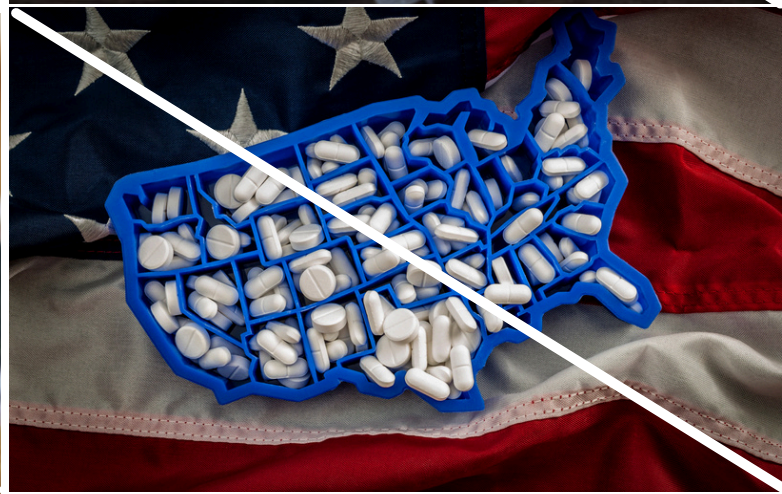
- Molecular symbols
- Dictionary definitions
- Typography without drugs or alcohol in the image



STIGMATIZING IMAGERY

Images to Avoid

- Substances, whether powders, crystals, marijuana, or pills
- Substances or people using substances, or paraphernalia, including needles, syringes, spoons, or lighters



RECOVERY



IMAGERY OF RECOVERY

Recovery imagery should be positive and hopeful.

Imagery to Use

- Wellness, health, and vitality
- Images, including nature and landscape, are positive and reinforce themes of new beginnings and health

Imagery to Avoid

- Anything that indicates hopelessness, sadness, or resembles private treatment websites



PEER SUPPORT
AND LIVED
EXPERIENCE
LEADERSHIP

IMAGERY OF PEER SUPPORT AND LIVED EXPERIENCE LEADERSHIP

Individuals with lived experience of substance use and/or criminal justice system involvement offer essential insight, empathy, and connection to support others in recovery.

Imagery to Use

- People supporting others in settings that feel welcoming, collaborative, and non-clinical
- People actively listening, encouraging, guiding, or celebrating progress together
- Visuals that emphasize mutual respect, shared experience, and connection

Imagery to Avoid

- Visuals that focus primarily on struggle, distress, or past substance use
- Portrayals that diminish peer support by framing it as informal, secondary, or less valuable than clinical care



A close-up photograph of a hand holding a set of keys. The most prominent feature is a large, silver-colored keychain shaped like a house with two windows and a door. The background is blurred, showing a person's face and hands. A dark blue rectangular overlay is positioned in the upper right corner, containing the text 'HOUSING AND STABILITY' in white, uppercase letters, followed by a short white horizontal line.

HOUSING AND STABILITY

HOUSING AND STABILITY IMAGERY

Imagery in this area should reinforce safety and the reality that recovery and stability are achievable by highlighting environments and moments that convey security, autonomy, connection, and a sense of home rather than blame, danger, or hopelessness.

Imagery to Use

- Safe, clean, and stable living environments or neighborhoods that feel welcoming, inclusive, and community-oriented
- People engaged in everyday activities that reflect routine and stability
- Moments that show progress and independence, such as receiving keys, signing a lease, or moving into a new space

Imagery to Avoid

- Images that display poverty, instability, or homelessness
- Visuals that imply criminality or danger in housing contexts, such as police presence as the central focus in residential settings



EMPLOYMENT AND PURPOSE



EMPLOYMENT AND PURPOSE IMAGERY

Imagery in this section should emphasize growth, capability, and active participation in shaping one's future, while avoiding portrayals that define individuals by their past or frame employment as conditional, punitive, or unattainable.

Imagery to Use

- Individuals engaged in meaningful work across a range of industries
- Active participation in job training, skill-building, education, teamwork, and problem-solving
- Realistic workplace environments that feel inclusive, supportive, and respectful

Imagery to Avoid

- Images that frame certain jobs as undesirable or lacking opportunity
- Images that focus on failure, frustration, or exclusion



FAMILY AND COMMUNITY CONNECTION



FAMILY AND COMMUNITY CONNECTION IMAGERY

Positive relationships and a sense of belonging are central to healing, recovery, and long-term stability. Imagery should reflect authentic connection, mutual support, and inclusion, reinforcing that people are part of families and communities and are not defined by substance use or criminal leg system involvement.

Imagery to Use

- Moments of everyday connection, such as sharing meals, playing, talking, or spending time together at home or in the community
- Positive parenting or friendships that show care, presence, and engagement
- Community gatherings or group activities that convey inclusion, support, and belonging

Imagery to Avoid

- Depictions of conflict, neglect, distress, or family separation
- Images that suggest individuals are unworthy of connection or must “earn back” relationships



