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SAMHSA **Press Release**

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New Nationwide Study Shows a Dramatic Rise in the Proportion of Older Americans Admitted for Substance Abuse Treatment from 1992 to 2008

New admissions data show sharp increase in the proportion of older Americans being treated for illicit substances such as cocaine, heroin and marijuana.

A new study reveals that between 1992 and 2008 the proportion of substance abuse treatment admissions involving older Americans (aged 50 and older) nearly doubled -- from 6.6 percent of all admissions in 1992 to 12.2 percent in 2008. The study, sponsored by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), also shows a sharp rise during this period in the proportion of older Americans admissions related to illicit drug abuse -- even though alcohol abuse is still the leading cause for admissions involving this age group.

Among its more notable findings the SAMHSA study reveals that from 1992 to 2008 the proportion of admissions among this age group due primarily to:

- Heroin abuse more than doubled -- from 7.2 percent to 16.0 percent.
- Cocaine abuse quadrupled -- from 2.9 percent to 11.4 percent.
- Prescription drug abuse rose from 0.7 percent to 3.5 percent.
- Marijuana abuse increased from 0.6 percent to 2.9 percent.

At the same time admissions primarily related to alcohol abuse decreased from 84.6 percent in 1992 to 59.9 percent in 2008.

The proportion of older American treatment admissions involving multiple substance disorders has nearly tripled from 13.7 percent in 1992 to 39.7 percent in 2008. For example, the proportion of admissions involving any alcohol abuse in combination with any cocaine abuse more than tripled -- from 5.3 percent in 1992 to 16.2 percent in 2008.

While the study showed that over three quarters of all older American treatment admissions initiated use of their primary substance by the age of 25, an increasing proportion of admissions involved substances that had only been initiated within five years prior to admission. In 2008, cocaine abuse was the leading primary cause of admissions involving substances initiated in the past five years (26.2 percent) among older Americans, with prescription drug misuse a close second (25.8 percent).

“These findings show the changing scope of substance abuse problems in America.” said SAMHSA Administrator Pamela S. Hyde, J.D. “The graying of drug users in America is an issue for any programs and communities providing health or social services for seniors.”

“The Administration on Aging supports healthy aging,” said Kathy Greenlee, Assistant Secretary for Aging. “A critical aspect of senior health is the ability to be free of alcohol and drug addiction. It is troubling, therefore, to see an increasing number of older Americans struggling with substance abuse. This is a trend we must address for the benefit of each individual now as well as a generation of baby boomers on the doorstep of old age.”

SAMHSA sponsored the study as part of the agency’s strategic initiative on data, outcomes and quality – an effort to create integrated data systems that help inform policy makers and providers on behavioral health issues.

SAMHSA is a public health agency within the Department of Health and Human Services. Its mission is to reduce the impact of substance abuse and mental illness on America’s communities.