FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
October 13, 2026

CONTACT: Max Geide
JoinUs@SUDVoices.org

"SUD Voices for Change" Launches to Elevate Lived Experience Leadership Across California

Statewide Initiative Amplifies the Voices of People Affected by Substance Use Disorder so Policies are Grounded in Real-World Experiences and Built for Those They Serve

(SACRAMENTO, Calif.) — SUD Voices for Change today launched as a statewide, community-led nonprofit created to elevate the voices, rights, and leadership of Californians affected by substance use disorder (SUD). Developed in partnership with the California Department of Health Care Services (DHCS), California Association of Alcohol and Drug Program Executives (CAADPE), and Los Angeles County Department of Public Health's Substance Abuse Prevention and Control (SAPC), the organization centers lived experience in advocacy and systems improvement to help ensure California's SUD policy landscape is more responsive, coordinated, and effective for the people it serves. To help shape inaugural policies and advocacy priorities, Californians across the state are encouraged to apply for the Consumer Advisory Group.

"California is making historic investments in behavioral health services, and there is an urgent need to ensure those living with substance use disorder are not overlooked within broader initiatives. Without meaningful participation by those most affected, the best-intended policies risk falling short, eroding confidence in systems and public investments," said **Robb Layne, Steering Committee member of SUD Voices for Change and Executive Director of CAADPE**. "The voices and experiences of those with lived experience are vital. Helping inform and guide policy from the start ensures system change is responsive, effective, and made with a recovery-first mindset."

SUD Voices for Change is California's first statewide movement led by people with lived experience of substance use and recovery. The organization **conducts community forums and advocacy trainings, builds leadership capacity, and creates channels for meaningful policy engagement**. Through these efforts, SUD Voices for Change helps improve policies affecting those with lived experience so the right care and services reach the right people at the right time.

"Stigma is pervasive and damaging to behavioral health care and recovery. It threatens the foundations of wellness and causes real risk, such as being denied housing, losing child custody, and facing employment retaliation. That is why people too often avoid disclosing lived experience," said **Brian Hurley, MD, Interim Director of the Substance Abuse Prevention and Control Bureau of the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health**. "To

effectively address these challenges and reduce stigma, we must work to ensure that those most affected are not merely consulted, but are true partners in shaping policy and program design."

Without intentional engagement by those with lived experience, California's SUD policy landscape has faced gaps in advocacy and leadership, resulting in misaligned investments, missed opportunities for innovation, and persistent barriers to care. True, meaningful participation happens when individuals feel protected, respected, and valued — and when government, providers, and advocates work together to embed community voice in program design.

SUD Voices for Change provides specialized, trauma-informed advocacy and leadership training for youth, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, LGBTQIA+, Tribal communities, and others affected by substance use. The goal is to help Californians with lived experience build skills, share their stories, and participate meaningfully in state policy and system-improvement efforts.

"Without openness, honest dialogue, and psychological safety, it is virtually impossible to implement effective, long-term change," said **Al Senella, Steering Committee member of SUD Voices for Change and President and Chief Executive Officer of Tarzana Treatment Centers**. "By supporting advocates wherever they are in their journey, breaking down the stigma surrounding substance use disorder, and creating a platform for meaningful advocacy and policy engagement, we are working toward a more equitable California."

As California's lead agency for Medi-Cal and behavioral health policy, DHCS partnered in the development of SUD Voices for Change to ensure community input informs statewide system design and implementation. The collaboration strengthens feedback loops between consumers, providers, and policymakers so investments and initiatives better reflect on-the-ground realities.

With its launch, SUD Voices for Change released educational materials, regional resources, and a public awareness campaign, and opened applications to a first-of-its-kind Advocacy Academy and Consumer Advisory Group. To learn more or get involved, visit SUDVoices.org.

About SUD Voices for Change
SUD Voices for Change is dedicated to elevating the voices and leadership of people affected by substance use disorder to help shape policy, enact system change, and improve access to care across California. Learn more at SUDVoices.org, and follow us on social media.