

The Team

Building on needs assessments and partnerships established through 2016, in January 2017, community organizations, government agencies and individuals from southeastern CT began regular monthly meetings focused on coordinating efforts and interventions in response to the overdose epidemic. Facilitated by Ledge Light Health District, the City of New London and Alliance for Living, this group serves as the Overdose Action Team of the Health Improvement Collaborative of Southeast Connecticut. There is robust participation from multiple sectors including first responders, social service agencies, public health, treatment providers, academia and people living with substance use disorder.

The Overdose Action Team's purpose is to:

- Convene interested individuals and groups;
- Coordinate efforts, resources and events when possible;
- Share and promote best practices;
- Come together around specific projects;
- Focus on the places where there is agreement and synergy;
- Share information and data.

The team has identified a mission statement, which is *to create and enhance conditions in our community that lead to sustained support for a continuum of care through a person's wellness journey.*

The Overdose Action Team's goals are:

- Coordinated, equal access to quality and appropriate treatment;
- Increased best practice treatment services;
- Comprehensive education and marketing about treatment options, prevention and support, and risks and signs of addiction;
- Stigma reduction;
- Comprehensive support services for families and communities;
- Policies, systems and practices that ensure equal access to appropriate and timely services and information.

The Team has also identified a list of values that are core to discussions and activities, as follows:

- We value a holistic approach that addresses all factors that impact a person's health and wellness.
- We value diversity in our team members and community partners.
- We value and respect people living with a substance use disorder and their lived experiences.
- We value addressing implicit and explicit bias and stigma.
- We value cultural humility.
- We value culturally respectful and appropriate services.
- We value collaboration and consensus building decision making.
- We value evidence-based practices, data and science about substance use and health.

The Work

Through asset mapping, stakeholder interviews, and collaborative brainstorming, the Overdose Action Team has identified the need for systemic improvements in many policies and practices that intersect and impact the current overdose epidemic. Moving forward, the Team will be working on the following issues and projects.

Stigma Reduction

Supporting people living with substance use disorder and their families in the best way possible requires that as a community we reduce the stigma associated with substance use disorder (and co-occurring mental health disorders) and approach the treatment of such as we do other health conditions. We need to share information about signs of addiction, overdose prevention and treatment resources in ways that reduce shame and promote health and wellness.

The Overdose Action Team is studying the science and best practices about stigma reduction. The Team is working on shifting the culture and language within the community at large and within the medical community so that we speak and react to substance use disorder just as we do other health conditions.

Coordinated Access to Treatment and Recovery Support Services

One of the most important actions we as a community can take is to connect people with substance use disorder to appropriate and on-demand treatment. Currently, connection with treatment resources is fragmented and dependent on a person's individual insurance status, knowledge of the treatment system, and, too often, the day of the week, time of the day, and individual biases about treatment options. Access to treatment can even be dependent on personnel relationships; our team strongly believes you should not have to "know someone" in order to access treatment. Every person in our community should have equal access to their desired and the most appropriate type of treatment and support services.

The discussion of access to treatment and recovery support services includes multiple levels and nuances. We are dedicated to connecting people with the treatment that best suits their particular situation. There is a real need in our community to increase awareness of and access to medication-based treatment options. In addition, once a person enters treatment, there may be a myriad of other needs that impact their ability to stay engaged with treatment and enter remission. Through the deployment of specialized community health workers or "Recovery Navigators" we are building relationships with people living with substance use disorder and using a harm reduction approach to support their individualized health goals. We are also looking at the social determinants of health and how we can connect people with wrap around services such as housing, transportation, employment and food security.

Naloxone Saturation

While we hope to reach a point in our community when we can support most people in accessing treatment and good health we must acknowledge the reality that overdoses will continue to occur. There is great opportunity to prevent deaths by ensuring that our community is saturated with naloxone kits, that people throughout the community know how and when to administer this life-saving medication, and that people who are using opioids know about Connecticut's Good Samaritan laws and don't fear calling 9-1-1 if someone they are using with overdoses.

The Overdose Action Team works with residents and business owners to assure wide availability of naloxone. These are supported by a social marketing campaign that includes bus advertisements, social media postings and outreach at community events to normalize and promote naloxone.