

Collaborating to Address the Opioid Crisis

Engaging People Who Use Drugs in Prevention Efforts: Benefits & Considerations

Prevention practitioners have long recognized that effective prevention relies on the participation of key community sectors and stakeholders. In the context of the current opioid crisis, these stakeholders include members of the drug-using community—self-described as “people who use drugs.” This group includes individuals who have initiated substance use and are at high risk for developing substance use disorders, as well as individuals with active substance use disorders who may or may not be receiving treatment.

This tool explores the benefits of engaging members of the drug-using community in prevention efforts and shares considerations for creating a safe and welcoming environment that supports their meaningful participation. To learn more about this topic, see the companion tool *Engaging People Who Use Drugs in Prevention Efforts: Strategies for Reducing Stigma*.

Why Include People Who Use Drugs?

A core value of prevention practice is that people should have a voice in matters that affect their health and communities. By working in partnership with community members—including members of the drug-using community—we not only show respect for the people we serve, but also increase our own capacity to provide prevention services that meet genuine needs, build on strengths, and produce positive outcomes. Some specific reasons for involving members of the drug-using community include the following:

- **They are often the first to respond to an overdose emergency.**¹ Two recent studies confirm that people who use drugs are most likely to both witness an opioid overdose² and administer the opioid

¹ Wheeler, E., Jones, T. S., Gilbert, M. K., & Davidson, P. J. (2015). Opioid overdose prevention programs providing naloxone to laypersons — United States, 2014. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 64(23): 631-635.

² Rowe, C., Santos, G., Vittinghoff, E., Wheeler, E., Davidson, P., & Coffin, P. O. (2015). Predictors of participant engagement and naloxone utilization in a community-based naloxone distribution program. *Addiction*, 110(8), 1301-1310.

overdose reversal medication naloxone to reverse it.³ Involving this group in overdose education and naloxone distribution programs is, thus, a key strategy in preventing overdose death among their peers.

- **They understand the experiences and needs of other active drug users.** For example, they can help you understand why people might be reluctant to access prevention services or help from first responders, and what approaches might be successful in overcoming these barriers. This information and insight can help you shape messaging and target services.
- **They can help you build connections.** Because opioid misuse is often illicit, finding and connecting with members of the drug-using community can be particularly challenging. Since substance use is often a social process that occurs in the context of relationships with other users,⁴ cultivating a “champion” who trusts and supports your efforts can help you connect with and obtain buy-in from their peers in the community.
- **They can help you understand the local substance misuse landscape.** This might include insight into who is using substances (for example, members of certain cultural groups), which substances are being used, where they are being used, and which local organizations are trusted sources of information and services. This information can help you target your prevention efforts appropriately and ensure they are relevant; it can also help you identify important service partners.

Engaging People Who Use Drugs

Engaging any new partner requires careful research and planning, as well as strategic and intentional relationship building. Since many people who use drugs have experienced some degree of marginalization, engaging members of this group may take additional consideration and time. Here are some tips for successful engagement:

- **Clarify your collaboration goals.** Consider what you would like to learn or achieve through collaboration, and how engaging members of the drug-using community will help you achieve these goals. Anticipate and be prepared to answer questions, such as: What do you and your coalition do? What does your coalition hope to accomplish? What are the expectations for participation?
- **Consider your partner’s needs.** Recognize that most strong partnerships are reciprocal in nature—if you help your partner, they will likely help you in return. Identify some concrete benefits of

³ Walley, A. Y., Xuan, Z., Hackman, H. H., Quinn, E., Doe-Simkins, M., Sorensen-Alawad, A., & ... Ozonoff, A. (2013). Opioid overdose rates and implementation of overdose education and nasal naloxone distribution in Massachusetts: Interrupted time series analysis. *BMJ (Clinical Research Ed.)*, 346:f174.

⁴ Center for the Application of Prevention Technologies. (2017). Prevention and harm reduction: Opportunities for collaboration to address opioid-related overdose webinar. Retrieved from: <https://www.samhsa.gov/capt/tools-learning-resources/prevention-harm-reduction-opportunities-collaboration-address-opioid>.

collaborating with your organization, such as regular access to naloxone or increased awareness and access to services, which you can offer to prospective partners.

- **Connect with trusted service providers.** These might include emergency rooms, college health services, employee assistance programs, food pantries, homeless shelters, and syringe exchange programs. The individuals working in these agencies can serve as “cultural brokers,” helping you connect with their clients, and help you make the case for participation in prevention efforts.
- **Tailor your outreach strategy.** Talk with people and organizations who already work with the drug-using community to find out which engagement strategies are most likely to be effective. What is the best way to connect? Would it help to bring a cultural broker with you? How should you frame your request? Which messages are most likely to resonate?
- **Choose an appropriate outreach liaison.** If possible, this should be someone who has experience working with people who use drugs, and who understands the goals and benefits of collaboration. This person should be a good listener and willing to develop rapport over time.
- **Take time to build trust.** Because they are frequently denied respect and care, recognize that it may take longer to build relationships with members of the drug-using community than with other potential partners. Part of this relationship-building is recognizing and accepting that recovery is not a linear process: partners who are in recovery at one point in your partnership may return to using at another point.
- **Grow your network.** Don't limit involvement to just one member of this community. As with any group of stakeholders, one representative cannot represent an entire group, and inviting just one representative may be perceived as tokenism versus a true commitment to meaningful involvement.

Working Effectively with People Who Use Drugs

Once you have identified individual(s) to include in prevention efforts, it is important to also consider how you will work together. Below are some suggestions for doing so effectively:

- **Check your assumptions.** Examine the stereotypes you may have about substance misuse and people who use drugs, and how these beliefs might compromise your ability to work respectfully with this group. If needed, involve outside experts who can help you identify and correct potential biases. Until your new partners feel welcome and safe, there is little chance that they will feel comfortable sharing their perspectives openly and honestly.
- **Create opportunities for meaningful participation.** This means engaging your new partners in ways that tap the unique knowledge, skills, and expertise they bring to the table. Work together to identify activities that are both worthwhile and satisfying. Examples might include educating health care or treatment providers about service gaps they may have experienced, participating in

naloxone distribution efforts, or participating in awareness-raising campaigns about opioid-related issues.

- **Respect privacy.** If these don't already exist, put in place guidelines that support open, honest, and respectful exchanges. Specifically, establish ground rules for talking about confidential matters and what can be repeated publicly or to the media, and have in place a plan for intervening if anyone starts to feel uncomfortable with the direction of the discussion.
- **Actively promote participation.** Structure conversations in ways that maximize participation. For example, consider alternatives to large group discussions (for example, by pairing up), as some individuals may feel uncomfortable sharing personal information in a large group.
- **Provide a stipend.** Stipends are a way to tangibly recognize and appreciate the time and expertise partners bring to your work. If you can't offer cash stipends, consider providing gift certificates to a local coffee shop or grocery store to show your appreciation.

Related Resources

SAMHSA Resources

Prevention Collaboration in Action Toolkit. This toolkit showcases stories of how practitioners work together to prevent substance misuse, along with 30+ tools and worksheets to help communities collaborate.

Trauma-Informed Approach and Trauma-Specific Interventions. This webpage describes SAMHSA's six key principles of a trauma-informed approach and includes a list of interventions that address the consequences of trauma and facilitate healing.

Words Matter: How Language Choice Can Reduce Stigma. This tool examines the role of language in perpetuating substance use disorder stigma, tips for assessing when and how we may be using stigmatizing language, and steps for ensuring that the language we use is positive and inclusive.

Prevention Conversations. This series of short videos features SAMHSA prevention grantees and specialists, who share information and stories related to the prevention of opioid misuse, overdose, and other substance-related problems. A few videos of particular interest include the following:

- » *Addiction as a Disease—Not a Moral Failure.* This video explores the nature of addiction and society's attitudes toward people with substance use disorders.
- » *Examining Our Biases About People Who Misuse Opioids.* The video underscores the importance of examining our misconceptions about people with substance use disorders.

- » *Harm Reduction and Opioid Misuse: Embracing Positive Change.* This video explores the role of harm reduction in helping people with substance use disorders stay healthy.
- » *Addressing the Opioid Crisis: Prioritizing What Works.* This video examines some of the ways prejudice toward people with substance use disorders can shape our approach to prevention.
- » *Lessons from Massachusetts: Changing the Conversation About Addiction.* This video looks at how changing attitudes toward people who use drugs can play a key role in program success.

Prevention and Harm Reduction: Opportunities for Collaboration to Address Opioid-Related Overdose. This webinar explores the overlap of opioid overdose prevention and harm reduction—and how developing a cultural understanding of each discipline’s philosophy and work can facilitate healthy collaborations.

Resources Developed by Other Organizations

Harm Reduction Coalition. This coalition provides training and resources to advance programs and initiatives that help people address the adverse effects of drug use. Two archived webinars of particular interest include the following:

- » *Harm Reduction Approach.* This two-hour webinar introduces a range of harm reduction strategies and encourages viewers to explore values and attitudes related to this approach.
- » *Injection Drug User Cultural Competence.* This 90-minute webinar explores the culture and experience of injection drug users in order to help participants understand how to work with this group in a culturally competent way.

The National Council. This organization offers education and practice improvement behavioral health resources, including webinars, conferences, print, and online resources.

Toward The Heart. This organization provides overdose prevention and response materials to educate people on how to use naloxone, as well as resources on reducing stigma.