



Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA)

Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Program (COSSUP)

## Vending Machines—A Surprising New Use for an Old Device

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We are now in the 10th year of a devastating and unprecedented overdose epidemic, as law enforcement and public health agencies are seeking new ways to stem the loss of life.<sup>1, 2, 3</sup> Tragically, each year opioid-related fatalities grow. New innovations such as diversion and deflection programs have sprouted up across the country as law enforcement agencies realize that long-term recovery, an admittedly sometimes difficult goal to achieve, is better served by directing those with substance use disorders (SUDs) toward addiction services rather than involving the criminal justice system.

Sheriffs, in particular, who manage jails that are often the largest provider of health care and addiction services in their jurisdictions have implemented numerous programs, partnerships, continuum-of-care reentry systems, and more to garner success in addressing this ever-growing epidemic. As first responders, law enforcement officers have found new tools to help navigate overdose situations where there is a very narrow window for treatment. One tool, naloxone, is an effective countermeasure and is the primary opioid overdose reversal agent available.<sup>4</sup>

Many first responders now carry naloxone. It is also frequently provided to individuals with SUDs in the lifesaving kits offered by outreach teams. Post-overdose recovery teams,<sup>5</sup> as they are sometimes called, are often supported



*Cumberland County, North Carolina's naloxone vending machine located in the county jail. Photo: courtesy of Ashley Curtice*



and staffed by a multidisciplinary membership that can include law enforcement officers, peer recovery specialists, and counselors. These collaborative teams are able to utilize their expertise and safely offer more support as a group to encourage those with SUDs to utilize either harm reduction or treatment services after an overdose incident. As law enforcement officers, and sheriffs specifically, continue to seek ways to help individuals struggling with SUDs, they are rethinking how their facilities—jails, in particular—can be places not only that provide connections to services but where resources can be distributed.

A recent innovation involving resource distribution has been the introduction of vending machines in jails that provide free naloxone, educational materials, and other items that can be used to assist individuals who are seeking help. Overdose is the leading cause of death for formerly incarcerated individuals reentering the community, and their overdose rates are significantly higher than those in the general population.<sup>6</sup> Given this risk, providing access to free naloxone to both those leaving jails and friends and family members visiting jails helps reduce the stigma of having to ask for the resource and is a great way to saturate the community with a valuable, lifesaving tool.<sup>7</sup> Having witnessed the need for greater access to naloxone, more and more counties across the country are seeking out local jails and other locations as useful places to increase distribution through the use of vending machines.<sup>8</sup>

In 2019, the Los Angeles County, California, Jail introduced naloxone vending machines in its facilities. After the first 9 months of 2020, it reported distributing more than 20,000 doses of naloxone. Other jurisdictions, such as Michigan, used a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Overdose Data to Action grant to place naloxone vending machine in facilities around the state. A number of other jurisdictions around the country have also followed suit, including New York City, New York, which has experienced a substantial uptick in overdose fatalities during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>9</sup>

Naloxone-dispensing vending machines are also being used in North Carolina. Thanks to a program sponsored by the National Center for State Courts, Buncombe, Cumberland, Forsyth, Guilford, Orange, Pitt, and Wilkes Counties were provided vending devices at no cost. In addition, a team

of community stakeholders, the North Carolina Harm Reduction Coalition, helped identify sheriffs and officials most open to this new way of distributing naloxone in order to place the machines in facilities and assign responsibility for filling the machines. Community partners can also work alongside law enforcement agencies to help coordinate efforts to design educational resources, including machine stickers and posters that provide instruction on naloxone administration.

While this approach is becoming popular, those seeking to locate and offer naloxone vending machines have, at times, run into barriers. One such limitation concerns the availability of naloxone. Since the coronavirus pandemic impacted the supply chain, production and distribution interruptions have prevented some jurisdictions from moving forward. Other program officials have run into philosophical pushback from elected officials concerned that making naloxone so available will encourage more overdoses.

Vending locations are not just in jails. They have also been placed in pretrial service locations, community correctional sites, and harm reduction agency offices. While this program is still too new to determine whether it is having any measurable effect on saving lives, it is clear that in some larger agencies where naloxone distribution and harm reduction principles have been accepted, the vending machines are being used and distribution of naloxone is increasing.

For those who have long worked in this space, they see initiatives such as the vending machine approach as a way to amplify the power of naloxone. Melissia Larson, a long-time expert in harm reduction in North Carolina and currently a program manager with the Research Triangle Institute, says, “There are many advantages to jails placing a naloxone vending machine in their publicly accessible areas: these machines provide naloxone to a population at high risk of overdose post-exit; they provide a distribution point for naloxone for community members visiting the jail; and they reduce time spent by jail staff to place naloxone kits in the personal property of individuals screened for opioid use disorder.”

As Chief William J. Bratton, former New York City Police Commissioner and pioneer of Broken Windows Policing, notes, “Out of every crisis comes opportunity.” Our law enforcement leaders are meeting the overdose crisis with lifesaving tools and re-envisioning how they can do more. Their innovations are saving lives.

## How to Learn More and Seek Funding

- ◀ CDC funding opportunities: <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/od2a/funding-announcements.html>
- ◀ National Center for State Courts Appalachian/Midwest Regional Judicial Opioid Initiative Naloxone Vending Machine Implementation Report: [www.ncsc.org/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0034/79945/RJOI-Vending-Report-FINAL-July-2022.pdf](http://www.ncsc.org/_data/assets/pdf_file/0034/79945/RJOI-Vending-Report-FINAL-July-2022.pdf)
- ◀ Bureau of Justice Assistance Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Program (COSSUP) (transitioning from the Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Abuse Program [COSSAP]) grant funding: <https://www.cossapresources.org/Program/Applying>

## Endnotes

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7. Parmar, M. K., J. Strang, L. Choo, A. M. Meade, and S. M. Bird, 2017, “Randomized Controlled Pilot Trial of Naloxone-on-release to Prevent Post-prison Opioid Overdose Deaths,” *Addiction* 112(3): 502–515, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27776382/>.
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9. Paz, I. G., 2022, “New York Plans to Install ‘Vending Machines’ With Anti-overdose Drugs,” *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/08/nyregion/naloxone-vending-machines-nyc.html>.

Visit the Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Abuse Program (COSSAP) Resource Center (transitioning in the next few months to the Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Program [COSSUP] Resource Center) at [www.cossapresources.org](http://www.cossapresources.org).

## About COSSUP

COSSAP is transitioning to the Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Program (COSSUP). This change in title for the program is indicative of efforts to reduce the stigma related to substance use and to support impacted people in their recovery journey.

Visit the National Association of State EMS Officials at <https://nasems.org/>.

## About Treatment Center for Safe Communities' (TASC) Center for Health and Justice (CHJ)

CHJ helps COSSUP grantees implement evidence-based, systemic solutions at the front end of the justice system to respond to the substance use that often underlies criminal justice involvement. CHJ helps build integrated criminal justice, behavioral health, and community systems by assisting first responders in developing pathways to treatment for individuals at risk for illicit substance use and misuse. CHJ offers online resources and in-person training and technical assistance (TTA) engagements customized to the needs of specific jurisdictions with the goals of connecting and maximizing the treatment resources of the community to improve public health and safety. Request TTA from CHJ by contacting the COSSUP Project Lead, Hope Fiori, at [hfiori@tasc.org](mailto:hfiori@tasc.org).

## About BJA

The Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) provides leadership and services in grant administration and criminal justice policy development to support local, state, and tribal law enforcement in achieving safer communities. To learn more about BJA, visit [www.bja.gov](http://www.bja.gov) and follow us on Facebook ([www.facebook.com/DOJBJA](https://www.facebook.com/DOJBJA)) and Twitter (@DOJBJA). BJA is part of the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs.

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