

Advancing Officer Preparedness of Public Health Responses With Evidence-based Curricula

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Law enforcement officers are often the first to respond to emergency calls for accidental poisoning and overdose events. As the number of overdoses continues to rise, criminal justice-serving agencies and the public health sector have continued to develop and strengthen their partnerships to better serve people with substance use disorders (SUDs). However, limited opportunities exist for officers to receive proper training and education on evidence-based responses to substance use-related calls for service. This lack of training may pose risks to the officers' physical and mental well-being.^{1, 2, 3}

Addressing this gap in training and education is essential for enhancing occupational safety, which includes numerous vital components that directly impact the well-being of officers. Occupational safety training involves understanding risk levels, implementing operational safety techniques—such as investing officers with situational awareness of their surroundings and wearing appropriate personal protective equipment when necessary—and addressing specific occupational hazards encountered during medical emergencies, such as overdoses or other substance-related incidents. By focusing on these occupational safety components, a comprehensive curriculum can effectively mitigate physical and mental risks faced by officers, promote a safer work environment, and reduce potential harm during drug-related law enforcement

operations. Evidence-based occupational safety trainings are crucial for educating officers on policies and practices that not only uphold drug laws but also emphasize harm reduction.⁴

Peer-to-Peer Training Models

Training of law enforcement officers occurs in various settings and contexts. The peer-to-peer training model emphasizes knowledge sharing and learning among law enforcement professionals, with experienced officers serving as trainers and mentors for their peers. Leveraging other law enforcement officers as instructors can build credibility in the content being shared. This model can be particularly effective when the information being shared is new or requires a level of buy-in for the subject matter; such is the case with public health and strategies for minimizing health risks and negative consequences.

Through peer-to-peer training initiatives, law enforcement agencies are now increasingly integrating more compassionate and supportive methods alongside traditional practices. By promoting understanding, empathy, and access to treatment, officers are better equipped to contribute to the well-being and recovery of individuals struggling with substance use. This response, in turn, supports their own wellness and occupational safety. Many

states have adopted a peer-to-peer model for occupational safety trainings focused on addiction, treatment, and naloxone administration. Through this lens, the trainings can enhance officers' knowledge, lessen physical and mental health risks, and improve the overall safety and well-being of officers.

In addition to offering an effective approach to equip law enforcement officers with the necessary knowledge and skills to address substance use-related calls, occupational safety training content can be presented in a manner that aims to foster compassion for those with an SUD into the officer's response. One notable initiative is the partnership among the Center for Addiction and Recovery Education (CARE) at Saint Joseph's University, the Pennsylvania Department of Health, and the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation. This collaboration provides a tailored peer-to-peer training program for first responders and justice professionals, delivering a deep understanding of substance use and equipping participants with strategies to approach individuals with compassion. Moreover, officers are given insight into valuable resources to connect individuals in need with appropriate treatment options.

While CARE focuses on providing peer-to-peer training for first responders and justice professionals, the Career Survival and Emotional Wellness training in Michigan takes a broader approach by equipping law enforcement officers with occupational safety techniques and emotional wellness strategies. Its aim is to provide strategies that can improve officers' emotional response to the challenges faced in daily police work. Through this training, officers learn to make appropriate decisions on when, how, and whom to respond to in situations involving signs of stress and trauma. In addition, participants are equipped to assist, intervene, and support others in need of care.

Overcoming Limitations and Implementing an Effective Curriculum

While the peer-to-peer training approach facilitates valuable exchanges of information and experiences, it also has limitations. A major one is the lack of evidence-based

and comprehensive curricula in the field of public health, harm reduction, and occupational safety. Existing trainings may not sufficiently cover the full breadth and depth of knowledge in these areas nor how they intersect. For example, peer-to-peer trainings typically cover naloxone, substance use, and substance use treatment, but do not include occupational safety. This gap highlights the need for expanded curricula. Such an enhancement would not only provide officers with a broader understanding of harm reduction—defined as strategies aimed at minimizing the negative impacts associated with substance use—but also integrate these principles within the context of occupational safety. Enhancing peer-to-peer trainings with a comprehensive and evidence-based curriculum links officer well-being and public safety with the fundamentals of harm reduction. This approach involves understanding harm reduction not just as a set of principles aimed at reducing the negative consequences of substance use but also as a vital component of ensuring officer safety and effective public health strategies.

In this public health context, occupational safety trainings present an opportunity to effectively introduce policies and policing approaches aimed at reducing harm to both the community and officers when enforcing drug laws. This encompasses minimizing risks associated with substance use and ensuring safer interactions for all involved. Existing research into occupational safety trainings for law enforcement indicates that the Safety & Health Integration in the Enforcement of Laws on Drugs (SHIELD) training stands out as an evidence-based training that encompasses topics related to public health and harm reduction principles. This approach aligns with broader public health strategies, exemplified by the Missouri Drug Overdose Trust and Safety project that integrates SHIELD training into its overdose prevention initiatives by ensuring that SHIELD-trained first responders are equipped to leave naloxone and educational materials behind at overdose calls for service. This comprehensive approach enhances the potential for reducing harm and promoting safety in drug law enforcement while advancing public health goals.

Expanding occupational safety trainings to cover a wide range of harm reduction strategies, in addition to substance use and naloxone, fosters positive police-community relations. This approach empowers officers to navigate complex situations while prioritizing officer well-being and community safety. By integrating evidence-based education into its curricula, law enforcement can become valuable resources, connecting individuals with appropriate treatment and recovery support services and promoting a compassionate and comprehensive approach to addressing substance use. Furthermore, the incorporation of evidence-based practices, with a dual focus on enhancing occupational safety for officers and reducing harm in community interactions, equips law enforcement agencies to contribute to safer communities. This holistic approach not only ensures the well-being and safety of officers but also leads to more positive outcomes for individuals with SUDs, fostering a community where safety and health are mutually reinforced.

For the most current resources and information, explore the Harm Reduction section in the Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Program (COSSUP) Resource Library: <https://www.cossup.org/Topics/HarmReduction>.

Endnotes

1. Cepeda, J. A., et al., 2017, "Occupational Safety in the Age of the Opioid Crisis: Needle Stick Injury Among Baltimore Police," *Journal of Urban Health* 94(1): 100–103, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28105586/>.
2. Beletsky, L., et al., 2020, "Addressing Police Occupational Safety During an Opioid Crisis: The Syringe Threat and Injury Correlates (STIC) Score," *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 62(1): 46–51, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6933083/>.
3. Beletsky, L., et al., 2020, "Fentanyl Panic Goes Viral: The Spread of Misinformation About Overdose Risk From Casual Contact With Fentanyl in Mainstream and Social Media," *International Journal on Drug Policy* 86: 102951, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7492952/>.
4. Baker, P., et al., 2021, "Municipal Police Support for Harm Reduction Services in Officer-led Referrals of People Who Inject Drugs in Tijuana, Mexico," *Harm Reduction Journal* 18: 76, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12954-021-00513-4>.

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