

Fact Sheet: Overdose Prevention Strategies for Law Enforcement

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Defining Harm Reduction

Harm reduction involves strategies that address the negative effects of substance use without completely extinguishing the behavior when people are not ready or able to stop use. Relapse can be a part of the recovery process, and harm reduction complements the delivery of evidence-based treatments. Evidence shows harm reduction strategies are effective in reducing overdose death, increasing referrals to treatment, and reducing infectious disease transmission.¹

Naloxone

Naloxone is a safe and effective lifesaving U.S. Food and Drug Administration-approved medication that is used to reverse the effects of an opioid overdose. Naloxone can support the restoration of normal breathing to a person if their breathing has slowed or stopped because of an opioid overdose. Naloxone has no effect on someone who does not have opioids in their system, and it is not a treatment for opioid use disorder. It is available in the form of nasal or injectable devices, and access varies by state. Community-based naloxone distribution prioritizes populations at high risk of overdose, such as those in criminal justice systems.

Fentanyl Test Strips

Illicitly manufactured fentanyl has become the primary driver of drug overdose deaths in the United States.² Fentanyl test strips can detect the presence of fentanyl in illicit drugs and provides people who use drugs with information about the substances they intend to take, alerting them to take precautions against fentanyl overdose. Fentanyl test strip results provide people who use drugs with information to engage in safer drug use practices, such as reducing the dose taken, using safer routes of administration, choosing not to use alone, and choosing not to use a substance. Access to fentanyl test strips varies by state. Justice practitioners are encouraged to consult their state laws, as some now exclude fentanyl test strips from their drug paraphernalia laws.³

Syringe Service Programs (SSPs)

Syringe service programs (SSPs) are harm reduction programs that provide access to sterile syringes for people who use substances and that allow for the safe disposal of used syringes. They also provide overdose prevention education, preventive supplies such as naloxone and fentanyl test strips (where legal), screening and assessment, and referral to treatment and other

supportive services.⁴ Evidence shows that SSPs increase an individual’s likelihood to access substance use disorder (SUD) treatment and recovery, reduce overdose, and reduce infectious disease transmission.⁵ Laws pertaining to SSPs vary among states, and justice practitioners are encouraged to consult their state laws to learn more.

Enhancing Law Enforcement’s Role in Harm Reduction to Prevent Overdose

Law enforcement agencies can undertake multiple activities to assist in the uptake of the harm reduction strategies described above, including the following:

- Provide training on the administration of naloxone and appropriate overdose responses to save lives.
- Initiate naloxone leave-behind programs for the scene of an overdose or upon encountering family or friends of those at risk for overdose.
- Support the use of fentanyl test strips and other drug-checking technologies to educate and inform individuals about the presence of the drug, thereby helping them to make informed decisions and potentially prevent fatal overdoses.
- Support SSPs by recognizing them as access points to broader health care services and by fostering collaborative relationships with service providers.
- Provide training and education for law enforcement officers on SUDs, harm reduction principles, drug overdose prevention, and the importance of collaborative partnerships with service providers in addressing underlying causes of drug use.
- When possible, incorporate public health-oriented approaches in addressing substance use, emphasizing prevention, treatment, and harm reduction interventions.

To find more harm reduction resources, visit the Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Program (COSSUP) Resource Center at <https://www.cossup.org/Topics/HarmReduction>.

Endnotes

1. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, (n. d.), Harm Reduction, retrieved from <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/harm-reduction>.
2. Ibid.
3. Legislative Analysis and Public Policy Association, (May 2021), *Fentanyl Test Strips*, retrieved from <http://legislativeanalysis.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Fentanyl-Test-Strips-FINAL.pdf>.
4. Legislative Analysis and Public Policy Association, (February 2022), *Syringe Services Programs*, retrieved from <http://legislativeanalysis.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Syringe-Services-Programs.pdf>.
5. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (U.S.), Office of the Surgeon General (U.S.), (November 2016), *Facing Addiction in America: The Surgeon General's Report on Alcohol, Drugs, and Health*, Washington (DC): U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Chap. 7, “Vision for the Future: A Public Health Approach,” available from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK424861/>.

Visit the Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Program (COSSUP) Resource Center at www.cossup.org.

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