

BJA Launches Online Tools to Equip Communities to Implement Overdose Fatality Reviews—and Save Lives

Catching Up With COSSAP, October 2020

“You start to see the light bulbs go off. You start to feel that sense of purpose and how important fatality reviews really are to prevention.”

—Aurielle Smith,
Wisconsin Department of Health Services

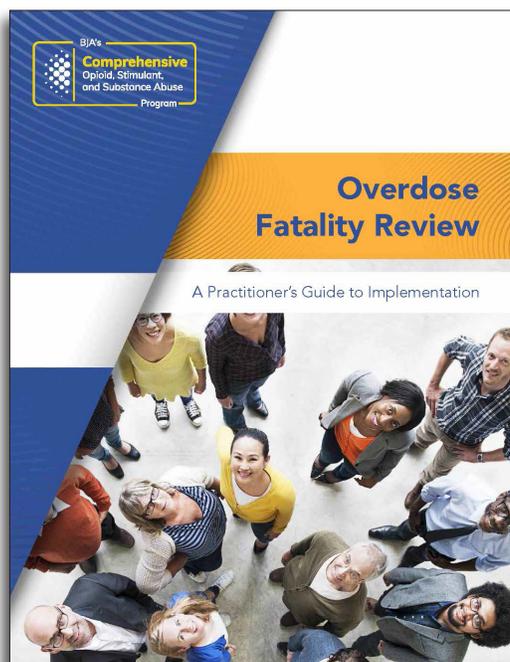
Overdose fatality reviews (OFRs) have emerged in recent years as one of the best strategies—and hopes—yet to save lives in the nationwide battle against substance abuse. By coordinating the expertise of a multidisciplinary team of law enforcement and EMS personnel, medical examiners, public and behavioral health, child and social services providers, and others, OFRs enable communities to spot missed opportunities for intervention, identify service gaps, and improve collaboration to prevent future deaths.

In other words, through their emphasis on coordination, OFRs show community stakeholders that overdoses are preventable, not an inevitability, and that the power to prevent them is in their hands—as long as all hands work together as a community.

In September, [BJA](#) took a major step toward helping communities realize OFRs’ potential by launching an online package of tools, expert guidance, and training opportunities on the Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Abuse Program (COSSAP) [Resource Center](#) to support the implementation of OFRs, both for COSSAP grantees and the field generally.

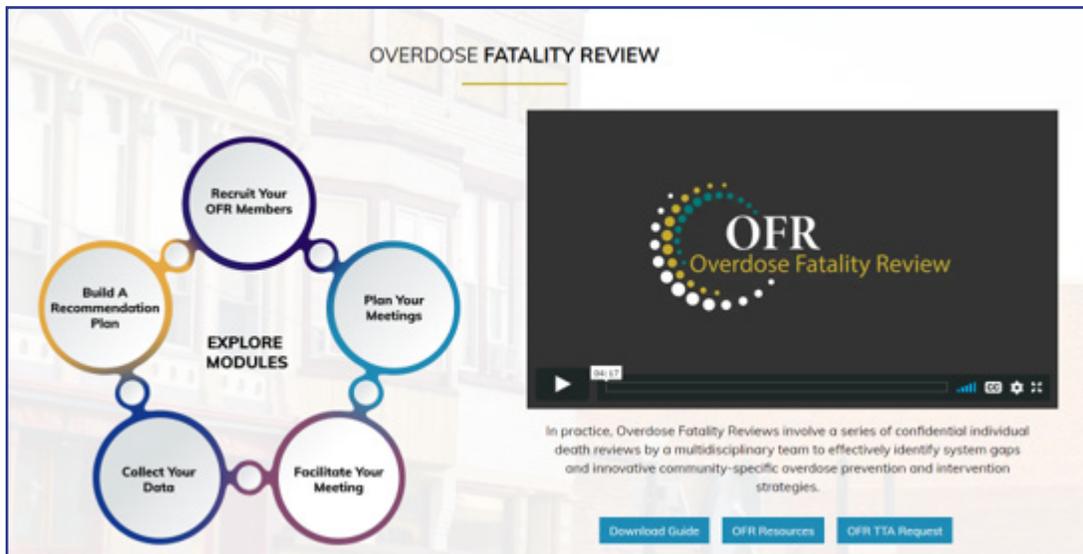
Developed in partnership with the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) with input from practitioners from across the county, this one-stop resource amounts to self-guided direction through the steps necessary to build a successful OFR on a strong foundation of coalition-building, data collection, and a commitment to overdose prevention. Site visitors are equipped with a practitioner’s guide to OFR implementation; an array of supplemental resources including sample meeting agendas, work plans, and data collection templates; and a user-friendly online form to request OFR training and technical assistance.

The new COSSAP OFR tools can be accessed at www.cossapresources.org/Tools/OFR.



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To a person, everyone involved in the development of the new tools singled out multidisciplinary coordination as the critical element of OFRs' success. For many, learning the value of that coordination was nothing less than a nose-in-front-of-your-face revelation.

"We all assume that everyone else knows how various parts of the system work—whether you're talking about aspects of the criminal justice system or within public health. But what you really see is that a lot of those assumptions don't hold or people really don't have a thorough understanding of other parts of the system. And that's really because everything operates connected but independent," said Constance Kostelac, assistant professor at the Medical College of Wisconsin. "[OFRs are] such an opportunity to learn at a system level how things work so that changes can really be implemented across the board to better people's lives."



Added Kimberly Reilly, who leads the Ocean County, New Jersey, Overdose Fatality Review Program, "When you bring all the partners in a room, you really start unraveling that web of substance use disorder. And you see the engagement from the criminal justice system and the hospitalizations, you kind of do a timeline, you get to really see where the gaps are in your local system of care . . . Until you can identify those gaps, you can't make meaningful change."



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And the Result of a Successful OFR?

“What surprised me most about participating in a fatality review was the willingness and comfortability that is established once everybody starts coming and starts coming regularly. There’s a little bit of apprehension that occurs at first . . . but once you get into that groove, you start to see the light bulbs go off,” said Aurielle Smith, Violence, Injury Prevention, Systems, Adolescent Health and Opioid Harm Prevention Unit coordinator for the Wisconsin Department of Health Services. “Once that kind of spark or magic happens, it’s so great, you really start to feel in the room that sense of purpose and why you’re doing this and how important fatality reviews really are to prevention.”



In practice, OFRs involve a series of confidential individual death reviews by a multidisciplinary team that examines overdose victims’ life cycles in terms of drug use history, encounters with the criminal justice system, and other factors to understand missed opportunities for prevention and intervention that may have prevented overdose deaths.

By conducting a series of OFRs, jurisdictions begin to see patterns of need and opportunity, not only within specific agencies but across systems. Blending input from public health, public safety, providers, and the community, OFR teams develop program and policy recommendations to

improve collaboration between agencies to prevent future overdose deaths. These recommendations are presented to a governing committee that provides resources for implementation and a framework for accountability for action.

Examples of successful, community-specific recommendations in response to OFRs include strengthening public safety/public health coordination, encouraging tracking of overdoses and naloxone distribution using the no-fee Overdose Detection Mapping Application Program (ODMAP), expanding use of [prescription drug monitoring programs](#), and increasing enforcement of treatment referrals by judges.

Ultimately, OFRs operate on the conviction that overdose deaths can be prevented with coordinated prevention strategies, timely implementation of evidence-based interventions, community mobilization, and supportive families and friends.