

Changes Spurred by OFR Team Transform Battle Against Substance Use in Winnebago County

Catching Up With COSSAP, December 2021

Even in the face of the twin scourges of COVID-19 and fentanyl, the [overdose fatality review \(OFR\) team in Winnebago County, Wisconsin](#), has pointed the way to a brighter future in the battle against substance use: one that better recognizes the correlation between addiction and related mental health and childhood trauma challenges, among others, and leverages networks of providers to identify and treat problems proactively so that future crises can be averted.

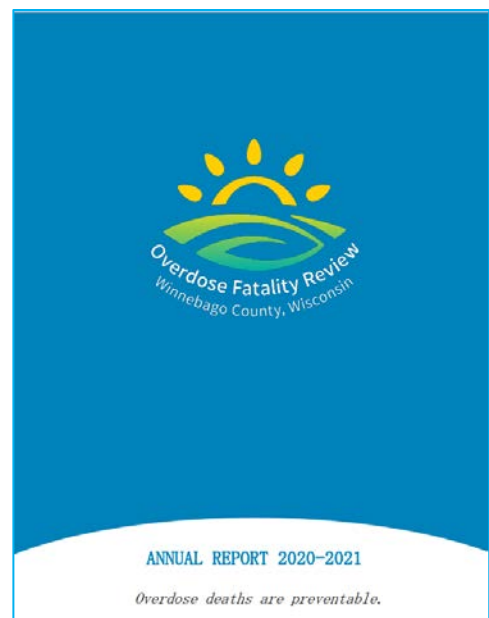
Those systemic changes were among the reforms enacted in Winnebago County directly as a result of recommendations by the OFR team, as reported by team leaders during a November review of its [2020-2021 annual report](#). Taken together, the recommendations show how OFRs—confidential death reviews conducted by multidisciplinary teams to identify system gaps and improve overdose prevention and intervention strategies—stand as perhaps the best vehicle available to make community responses to substance use a holistic effort that is alert to service gaps and equipped with real-time tools to overcome them.

The OFR team—a [COSSAP OFR peer mentor site](#) comprising 47 community partners across different sectors, including treatment, recovery, education, health, law enforcement, and city and county services—began the review with a clear-eyed acknowledgement that Winnebago County continues to struggle with overdoses. The county recorded 37 overdoses resulting in unintentional deaths in 2020—its highest total ever—and has already witnessed 28 with nine more pending or probable in 2021 (through November 29). In 2020, it recorded a 250 percent increase in overdose deaths among women, as well as a rise in overdoses among individuals aged 25–34. Overdoses in the county have disproportionately affected people of color, and in 2020 victims were increasingly dying alone at home—a “sad statistic” reflective of their lack of social connectedness and support from the community, said OFR team facilitator Jennifer Skolaski.

“I would love to say that this initiative has changed numbers entirely, but people are still dying,” she added.

Concurrent with the rise has been an increase in suicide attempts in the county. Skolaski attributed part of the negative trends to the emergence of fentanyl in Winnebago County’s drug market: 28 of the 37 overdose deaths in 2020 (fully 76 percent) involved the highly toxic synthetic opioid, as did 18 of the confirmed 28 cases in 2021, with at least 6–7 of the 9 pending.

However, it was clear that COVID-19 had most impacted overdoses in the county—and the work of the OFR team. While the team continued to meet monthly, it switched to a virtual format, which mirrored gaps in county services caused by COVID-19’s impacts—among them housing and residential treatment—which in turn had negative effects on individuals struggling with substance use. Rising unemployment rates and evictions and diminishing access to child care for many parents added new stressors to many households—serving as another driver of addiction.



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But these sobering challenges were not enough to undo the remarkable evolution that the OFR team has witnessed since its establishment in 2018 as the brainchild of the Winnebago County Drug and Alcohol Coalition, supported by grants from COSSAP's predecessor, the Comprehensive Opioid Abuse Program, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"We're in a much different place than in 2018," when "no one talked" during the OFR team's first three meetings, Skolaski said.

Gradually, team members became more willing to admit their organizations' vulnerabilities in addressing substance use, which led to trust-building and ultimately an "awesome" culture shift in the community, Skolaski said.

"We realize it's a gift to be able to review someone's life," Skolaski said. "And we're taking it seriously by bringing urgency to the work we're doing while paying tribute to the legacies that that person who died is leaving behind."

Now, that foundation of cooperation within Winnebago County's OFR team—one of 17 teams among Wisconsin's 20 counties—has informed a host of recommendations ranging from "quick fixes," in Skolaski's words, to systemic, state-level changes. The following were among the recommendations included in the 2020–2021 annual report:

- Identifying strategies to reduce overdoses that occur shortly after release from incarceration
- Encouraging healthcare professionals to co-prescribe naloxone (Narcan) with opioids
- Training law enforcement and emergency medical system personnel about peer support, mental health, and substance use

Most compelling—and most impactful—of the OFR team's recommendations, however, were two that are already transforming Winnebago County's approach to substance use.

One recommendation resulted in the establishment of the county's new [Handle With Care](#) initiative (part of a national program), a partnership between the Oshkosh, Wisconsin, Police Department and Oshkosh schools by which police inform school social workers when individual students have been exposed to traumatic incidents at home that precipitated a police call.

2020-2021 OVERDOSE PREVENTION RECOMMENDATIONS

Our team knows that action is the only way we are going to prevent deaths from happening. In our work together we pilot a lot of ideas and are proud of the successes we have made, but realize we have a lot of work left to do.

OFR Successes

1. Handle with Care Pilot

To address childhood trauma and connect the school and law enforcement systems, we worked with Oshkosh Area School District and Oshkosh Police Department. In our short pilot of 7 months, we had over 70 referrals. Social workers said all the kids referred were new to the system of support, which means we have a great opportunity to reach more kids impacted by trauma. We're looking forward to formalizing and growing this program in the fall of 2021.

2. How to Get the Job Done: Working through Burnout, Secondary Trauma & Compassion Fatigue Training

Based on our recommendation to offer training and support to law enforcement agencies in Winnebago County regarding trauma informed care, we had a pilot with local officers. Participants were able to be vulnerable, learn and develop new skills to enhance job performance, and address self-care concepts. These efforts reduce secondary trauma, help with crisis intervention, and can reduce further trauma of children and loved ones.

3. We Heart You Cards

This incredible resource not only shares necessary phone numbers, but also sends an important message to those struggling, as well as their friends and family. Our partners have distributed these cards to agencies in ten counties across Northeast Wisconsin to assist in service referral related to substance use. It's also gone as far as Pennsylvania! Breakwater has made a PSA about the card that is shared widely, and it has been highlighted in the Oshkosh Herald since April 2020, and will continue until March 2022.

4. OFR success is also based on the success and hard work of our partners.

- Unity Recovery Services gained a regional Basic Needs Giving Partnership grant for capacity building.
- Menasha Community Addiction Assistance Program (MCAAP) has helped connect 10+ people to care through their program and seen a decrease in overdose deaths.
- Winnebago County Jail is now handling out Narcan to help those most at-risk for overdoses.
- TheDaCare Behavioral Health Walk-in Care in Neenah opened in 2020 to help people when they most need it.
- Sandy Shaffer and Lindsay Loewe of Collaborative Wellness started a group dual diagnosis program at Solutions.
- Many of our OFR partners went above and beyond during the pandemic, and we celebrate all their efforts to make this community better!

New Recommendations

Last year we recognized that Mental Health, Child Trauma, and Recovery Support and Communication of Lessons Learned were our top priorities. Our work has continued to address these areas, as well as to identify new recommendations.

- Offer training on peer support, mental health, and substance use to law enforcement and Emergency Medical Systems.
- Enhance OFR partners' awareness and knowledge of the Child Protective Services process.
- Increase the number of mental health clinicians who are competent in providing integrated mental health and substance use services.
- Identify strategies to reduce overdoses that occur shortly after release from incarceration.
- When prescribing opioids, healthcare professionals in Winnebago County should co-prescribe Naloxone (Narcan) and educate people who may encounter an opioid overdose event.
- Statewide Recommendation: When prescribing opioids, healthcare professionals should co-prescribe naloxone (Narcan) and educate people who may encounter an opioid overdose event.
- Create a Winnebago County OFR logo.
- Pilot a data-driven proactive rapid response team in Winnebago County that aims to prevent overdose deaths.



"This is one of the really great things to come out of the OFR team," said Matthew Kaemmerer, Director of Pupil Services for the Oshkosh Area School District. The program evolved from the growing realization among law enforcement officers that often when they responded to an overdose call, children would be present at the scene. For Kaemmerer, the question became, "How can we do a better job of supporting children who have experienced significant trauma?"

Handle With Care instituted streamlined communications between Oshkosh police and schools so that when a police officer identifies potential trauma suffered by a child, he or she fills out a form that is then forwarded to a social worker at the school who is able to take proactive steps to help the student. Program participants have also received training on trauma-informed care.

Chari Jensema, a social worker in the Oshkosh schools who supports Handle With Care in four schools, described a recent case when police responded to an incident involving domestic violence and substance use where a six-year-old boy was present. When the boy failed to show up at school the following day without any

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notification that he would be absent and his mother could not be reached, the Handle With Care referral led the school's social worker to contact his grandmother, who picked up the boy at home and brought him to class. "We prefer family support" in such instances, Jensema said. "We just wanted to make sure the child was safe."

Jensema subsequently learned that a Winnebago County social worker had already been working with the boy's mother—and was in fact due to close her case that very day. Together, the social workers extended the support for the mother and helped her start a relapse prevention plan.

"The long-term goal is prevention so that we're not in a crisis situation," Jensema said. "The ultimate goal is to have students graduate and have them be well-adjusted."

Handle With Care's results speak for themselves: After being piloted in November 2020, the program generated 70 referrals to Oshkosh schools during the 2020–2021 academic year. During the first two months of the current school year, as more schools have signed on, it has already produced 65 referrals.

The second recommendation resulted in another merger of two aspects of treatment—substance use and mental health—that doesn't occur as frequently as one might expect. Sandy Shaffer, a clinical substance abuse counselor at Collaborative Wellness, a team of mental health counselors in Winnebago County, noticed as a result of one particular OFR team recommendation that many individuals with substance use disorders have difficulty managing the many appointments for treatment they're referred to.

In response, Shaffer started a private practice a year ago to offer combined mental and substance use treatment for groups, free of charge, recognizing that co-occurring disorders are common among individuals battling addiction.

"They are dual diagnosis groups," Shaffer said, "not a support meeting, but actual group therapy, working on various emotional and physical aspects of everything."

Her results are impressive too: through the end of October, Shaffer's meetings have provided 1,110 hours of service to 97 people. Another group program, started in October, has already served 19 individuals.

"We're off to a great start," she said.

A related OFR team recommendation led Shaffer to help get mental health clinicians competent in treating SUDs so that individuals can receive two forms of treatment in a single visit. To date, 12 clinicians have received training, with more interested.

For Skolaski, these successful outcomes of Winnebago County's OFR team represent incremental—but important—steps toward a whole-of-community approach to substance use that stands the best chance to reduce and prevent overdoses.

"We have to continue our work together so that in the long term we see not only that the number of people dying from overdoses goes down but that as a community we are supportive in embracing recovery, a community where people have access to treatment whenever they're ready to get help, a community that addresses child trauma and other adverse child effects, which in turn stops the cycle of substance use and trauma," she said.

Click [here](#) for video of the Winnebago County OFR team's review of its 2020–2021 annual report.