



Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA)-Supported
Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Abuse Program (COSSAP)
**Successful Strategies for Addressing the Opioid
Epidemic in Rural Communities: Engaging the
Local Business Community**

The **Rural Responses to the Opioid Epidemic (RROE) project**, co-funded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the State Justice Institute, supports 21 rural sites across the country to develop or enhance efforts to strengthen epidemiologic surveillance and public health data infrastructure; implement effective community-level opioid overdose prevention activities; and establish or enhance public safety, public health, and behavioral health collaborations. Sites may also expand peer recovery and recovery support services that help people start and stay in recovery.

Learn more about the RROE project at <https://rural.cossapresources.org/>.

Nearly one in three adults in the United States have criminal records, and more than 600,000 men and women are released from jail back into their communities every year. Connecting these individuals with employment is crucial, as employment provides a stable income necessary to meet many other needs, such as housing, transportation, food, and more.

Rural communities across the country are identifying ways to effectively partner with their local business community to better serve residents with substance use disorder (SUD) and make more efficient use of limited resources. This brief is one in a series highlighting projects that are part of the RROE project.

Topics in Successful Strategies for Addressing the Opioid Epidemic in Rural Communities Series

- Engaging With Faith-Based Organizations
- Law Enforcement- and First Responder-Led Diversion Programs
- Engaging the Local Business Community
- Youth and Families Prevention and Intervention
- Harm Reduction
- Transportation
- Response Teams
- Jail-Based Programming

**Upper Cumberland
Human Resources
Agency**



Upper Cumberland Human Resources Agency

The [Upper Cumberland Human Resources Agency \(UCHRA\)](#) services 14 rural Tennessee counties, encompassing 5,000 square miles, as part of its RROE project. In 2020, the region saw 149 drug overdose deaths, which represents a death rate of 41.4 per 100,000 population. In 6 of the 14 counties, medication-assisted treatment (MAT) providers are not available. UCHRA's Substance Abuse Services (SAS) department works to help individuals with SUD access treatment and services, including what Glen Sayes, SAS director at UCHRA, calls the "three-legged stool" of housing, employment, and transportation. "How do people get a place to live, a place to work, and then the methodology to go between those two places?"

UCHRA was recently awarded a grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission for its recovery-to-work program, including funding to hire a full-time employment specialist. The employment specialist will focus on three main goals: (1) helping individuals find employment, (2) identifying recovery-friendly businesses in the community, and (3) supporting businesses that are willing to hire individuals in recovery.

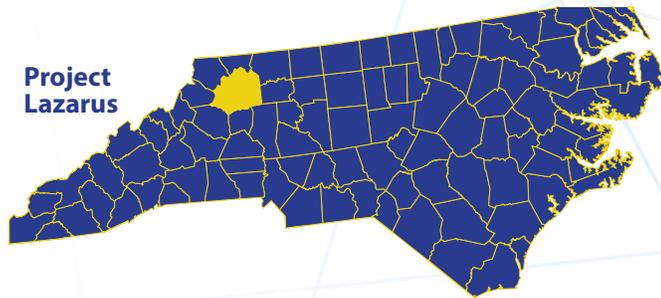
The employment specialist interviews individuals to help discover their skills and interests and will

sometimes identify an immediate job opportunity for the individuals. Most often, they do connect them with local resources and the American Job Center to help build additional skills as necessary. Perhaps most importantly, the employment specialist and UCHRA are committed to staying with an individual—and their new job—for 2 full years. "We are letting the employer know that we are there. We are going to be with that person they are hiring for a 2-year time period," explains Sayes. "So, we will be there if a problem does come up, don't panic, don't immediately throw up the red flag and say, 'We're out of here.' Contact us. Let us deal with the problem. Let us work with you."

In terms of recovery-friendly businesses, Sayes explains that they look for places that understand what it means to hire a person in recovery and how best to support them and have found approximately 20 employers in the area thus far. They are also using the "[Recovery to Work](#)" toolkit, adopted by the Tennessee Chamber of Commerce, to approach employers with step-by-step guidance for becoming recovery friendly, including definitions, training materials, checklists, and more.

Another important facet of this work is helping businesses retain current staff members who may have or develop a substance use issue. "If we can establish that relationship now with people that they're hiring in recovery to work," Sayes says, "Then it lets us go to the next step of when they have other valued employees they may have had for 5, 6, 10 years who may also have or develop a substance use issue that is affecting their employment, we can come in and begin working with those people rather than firing them and having to replace them." This type of ongoing employee support will also help fund UCHRA's efforts: "If we can do that and help

retain that employee, then that gives us an element of sustainability because we are able to charge the insurance company they're using for those recovery services," Sayes explains.



Project Lazarus

[Project Lazarus's](#) RROE project focuses on Wilkes County, located in the upper northwest corner of North Carolina with a population of approximately 65,000. In 2016, Wilkes County suffered 43 drug overdose deaths per 100,000, 27 of which involved at least one opiate. The number of deaths in the county has declined or remained steady while seeing substances change. There has been an increase in methamphetamines, fentanyl, and alcohol use. The number of naloxone administrations by emergency medical services has increased over the years, but naloxone rescues by individuals in the community are also increasing. Project Lazarus is a non-profit organization that works on prevention, intervention, and recovery and educates local businesses, human service agencies, faith, medical, and school community members on all aspects of SUDs. "In rural communities, as we all know, most businesses really do want to invest in the community," says Fred Brason, president and CEO of Project Lazarus. "They want to do it in a safe, responsible manner," so Project Lazarus makes a concerted effort to build relationships and share information with businesses

about how they can assist individuals with SUD and the community.

"We explain why they are needed in this space and help them to understand that role . . . and then also work to understand what they need to know in order to be engaged, so they can be supportive," Brason says. "And finally, what needs to be done? We walk everybody through the process, so they can see there is a role they can have."

Once a relationship is built with a local business, Project Lazarus has found the benefits are bidirectional—both the business and the individual see positive outcomes from the partnership. Businesses that hire Project Lazarus clients have access to a wider pool of employees than if they were unwilling to hire individuals with SUD and/or who are justice-involved, and in some cases, are even able to rehire an individual who perhaps lost their job due to their substance use but now does not need to be retrained. In addition to the obvious benefits of an individual having a steady income, Brason also notes that when individuals are employed in a job that provides health insurance, that insurance can then pay for or help offset their costs of treatment, medication, and other health needs. "It becomes a mutual win-win for the community . . . We're getting more people moving out [of the area], so we're doing all we can to make sure people stay and have viable jobs, building their families, and everybody together is working on making a difference and changing and saving lives," says Brason. "We are now seeing employment opportunities arranged prior to inmate release as more local businesses realize there are individuals seeking to move into a positive direction. Supporting each for housing, clothes, food, and other life necessities enables a pathway to success that historically were insurmountable barriers," he says.

Lessons Learned

Understand business needs and interests. It is important to meet employers where they are and potentially where they are interested in going. “Some will be engaged in the prevention end; some will gladly step into the recovery end,” says Brason. “We want to understand what they’re about and what their interests are. What their interests are is where their energy is going to be.

Help employers understand the benefits of a recovery-friendly workplace. Many employers, especially in rural areas, are in desperate need of workers. “It’s not a problem finding jobs,” says Sayes. “It’s getting the right people to these jobs and then

keeping them in these jobs.” Providing resources about hiring individuals in recovery and ongoing support to businesses and their staff can help ensure a smooth hiring and employment process for all.

Think creatively about how businesses can support SUD efforts. Project Lazarus partnered with a local business that does painting and crafts to help connect with youth and families through online painting classes. The business provided materials for the activity and benefitted from reaching customers it may not otherwise have connected with. “It was a win-win all the way around,” Brason says. “We got the support we needed for the activity, and businesses got more people engaged in what they are and what they were doing.”

Visit the COSSAP Resource Center at www.cossapresources.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 and follow us on Facebook (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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