

Cabell County, West Virginia, Success Story

In 2017, Cabell County, West Virginia, was experiencing one of the highest overdose and fatality rates in the nation, with more than 1,831 ambulance overdose calls that year. Beginning in December 2017, a Quick Response Team (QRT) program was implemented in the city of Huntington to provide proactive outreach to individuals in the community who were identified through emergency medical services (EMS) data as having survived an overdose event.

The QRT utilizes personnel from EMS, law enforcement agencies, treatment providers, faith leaders, and partners with the Department of Public Health at Marshall University for research and evaluation. The QRT has full access to EMS overdose data, which it uses to view the location where an overdose occurred and the location that the individual lists as his or her place of residence.

Even if an individual declines transport to the hospital, the QRT retains the client's demographic information and is able to follow up with him or her within 72 hours. Shortly after the QRT started individual visits, it became clear to

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The Huntington QRT, after being selected for the "Innovations Now" award for the Addiction Policy Forum.

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team members that the services provided were needed by more than just overdose victims. One individual asked, “Do you have to overdose to get help?” This question led to the creation of an outside referral number that clients and families can call to ask for help.

Then, recognizing that first responders were the first point of contact after an overdose, the county established a first responder deflection program using crews already in the field. The law enforcement officers involved in the program engage with individuals on a personal level, in a very nonconfrontational atmosphere, with members dressed in casual clothing and no uniforms. The first words to an affected individual are always, “You are not in trouble,” followed by the assurance that police are not there to arrest anyone or to look for drug paraphernalia. Rather, the goal is to meet the individual’s immediate needs and to help him or her navigate the often-difficult treatment system. Individuals have been very receptive to this approach, which is often in contrast to the hostility and confrontation that can sometimes occur from both parties at the scene of an overdose—hostility and confrontation are not present at an intervention.

The results speak for themselves: following the implementation of these programs, Cabell County EMS saw a 40 percent decrease in overdose calls between 2017 and 2018. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the overall overdose call volume has decreased by 45 percent since 2017.

Throughout the planning and implementation of the QRT and the deflection program, team members agreed that the main lesson learned is to work collaboratively with all stakeholders involved. Overdoses were a community issue that impacted city and county

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government, businesses, organizations, and service providers. The collaboration among all involved agencies led to successful implementation of these programs and resulted in cooperation never seen before in the community. It is easy to point to the public resources and funds that have been saved as a win. However, the impact on individuals and their loved ones is what is most valuable. Many people had no idea how to find help and had lost hope that anyone cared about them.

A piece of advice for communities looking to implement similar programs is to find a champion. No one can change everyone’s mind, but you can change one mind at a time. Study the data, and acknowledge it, even if you do not like the trends you are seeing. Ignoring the issues will not make them go away.

The work that Cabell County has done since 2017 has been recognized nationally. We received a national “Innovation Now” award for the Addiction Policy Forum in 2019. In addition, we were featured on multiple national news stories, selected as a national mentor site by the Bureau of Justice Assistance, asked to serve on advisory boards to help develop first responder deflection models on a national level, and asked to conduct peer reviews of laws that will impact these models for years to come. However, the most rewarding accomplishment is helping our community regain something it had lost—hope for a better future.



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