

Lessons Learned: Harm Reduction-Public Safety Partnerships

DEFINING 'HARM REDUCTION' AND 'PUBLIC SAFETY'

Harm reduction, at its most basic, is about meeting people where they are. It is a movement for reparative social justice by and for people who use drugs (PWUD) and uses a set of practical strategies aimed at reducing the negative consequences often related to criminalized drug use (Harm Reduction Coalition, 2020; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2021). **Public safety** refers to people and organizations charged with protecting the public and their wellbeing by preventing and reducing danger and responding to emergencies, such as police officers, emergency medical responders, firefighters and parole officers.

PILLARS OF HARM REDUCTION

- 1** Be guided by PWUD and people with lived experience (PWLE) of drug use.
- 2** Embrace the inherent value of people.
- 3** Commit to deep community engagement and community building.
- 4** Promote equity, rights and social justice.
- 5** Offer the lowest barrier access and non-coercive support.
- 6** Focus on individually defined, positive change.

HISTORICAL TENSIONS BETWEEN HARM REDUCTION AND PUBLIC SAFETY

For many years, tension has mounted between harm reduction organizations and public safety initiatives, ultimately because of collective stigma, lack of training, historical trauma and penalization of PWUD. For example:

- Substance use and substance use disorders (SUD) may be viewed as issues that should be addressed by public safety, rather than as a medical concern or systemic need rooted in social and economic disparities.
- Public safety may be expected to respond to SUD needs without being given the necessary tools or training.
- Public safety may be required to work at cross-purposes with other teams that have widely differing structural barriers, ideologies and laws, which can lead to unintentional misunderstanding or frustration.
- Harm reduction services and strategies aimed at helping PWUD may be partially or completely illegal, which can lead to tensions between harm reduction organizations and law enforcement.
- PWUD have been historically penalized by policies and have trauma related to and/or previous negative experiences with public safety that may contribute to their view of public safety professionals.




KEY TIPS:

- **Prioritize the voices of PWLE of drug use and/or criminal legal involvement at every stage of the process.** Make sure they are equitably compensated, in both payment and respect for their unique expertise. This approach builds trust with harm reduction partners and ensures that once implemented, the project will resonate with participants and reach more people in need.
- **When possible, public safety participating in any shared programming should be out of uniform and in non-police vehicles.** They should also allow harm reduction outreach staff to lead initial conversations with potential program participants or clients. While this may differ from typical public safety protocol, this small change can have a massive impact on participant comfort and willingness to engage.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM REAL-WORLD PILOTS

In 2023, the National Council for Mental Wellbeing, with support from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), awarded funding to eight grantees across the country to implement harm reduction-public safety collaborations aimed at reducing the risk of overdose and other drug-related harms for PWUD and people with SUDs (PWSUD) who are, or may become, justice-involved. The power of these collaborations and lessons learned from these partnerships have the potential to change the way communities view and address substance use nationally.


BUILD AND NURTURE RELATIONSHIPS WITH PUBLIC SAFETY PARTNERS

 Successful partnerships start with relationship-building and require active nurturing. It may be helpful to meet your partners on neutral ground (e.g., in community settings), rather than in either partners' place of work. Relaxed social gatherings, such as monthly breakfasts or community events, can create opportunities for mutual understanding and team building. Despite different perspectives and backgrounds, harm reduction and public safety partnerships can work toward the same goal by maintaining respect for and understanding of their respective roles and frameworks.

CASE STUDY: WILKES RECOVERY REVOLUTION POST-OVERDOSE RESPONSE TEAM

Wilkes Recovery Revolution (WRR) is a nonprofit recovery community organization whose mission is to create a community where recovery is possible for all through restoring hope, repairing lives and rebuilding community. The WRR Post-Overdose Response Team (PORT) works in conjunction with local emergency medical services, police and a medical center. Initially, the PORT was not widely accepted by public safety, as indicated by limited client referrals from public safety personnel. However, once WRR dedicated time to nurturing the relationship with public safety by talking with partners and holding informal breakfasts, the team saw a noticeable increase in referrals to the PORT and in the respect and appreciation for the project from public safety partners.


ACTIVELY ENGAGE PARTNERS IN DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING SHARED PROGRAMMING

 Throughout the programmatic process, from design to implementation, it is essential to actively engage all harm reduction and public safety partners. One way to do this is to embed harm reduction outreach workers within public safety teams (e.g., police ride-alongs) or to pair harm reduction staff with public safety for team-based community outreach (e.g., post-overdose response visits). Ensure public safety partners offer adequate support to outreach staff. Internally, harm reduction and public safety organizations should incentivize their staff to participate by creating a reward system for meeting certain benchmarks to encourage staff participation in shared programming. Feedback loops for quality improvement can also foster active participation, allowing all parties involved to voice their opinion, find opportunities for compromise, obtain valuable insights and make informed decisions, all of which will enhance a program's effectiveness.

CASE STUDY: MOAB REGIONAL RECOVERY CENTER PROGRAM IN GRAND COUNTY JAIL

Moab Regional Recovery Center (MRRC), which provides recovery, treatment and harm reduction services, partnered with the local county sheriff's office to provide targeted outreach and services to individuals recently released from jail who are at increased risk of opioid-related overdose. When the jail-based programming first began, the MRRC team was handing out risk reduction kits without any container or bag. Jail staff and corrections officers flagged that when individuals were discharged, they had no way to carry supplies or even their own belongings. Learning this, MRRC shifted its approach and used grant funds to purchase backpacks pre-stocked with risk reduction kits to give to individuals upon their discharge.

LEVERAGE THE POWER OF HARD DATA AND PROJECT CHAMPIONS

 Whether convincing organizations to partner on the project or demonstrating project success, a combination of quantitative data, testimonials and encouragement from project champions is invaluable. When recruiting public safety partners, for example, harm reduction organizations may benefit from presenting data on the success of other similar programs and having public safety individuals who are already on board with harm reduction to make the case to their peers. High-ranking public safety individuals have the opportunity to have a large impact by showing their teams the importance of projects (and harm reduction more broadly) for saving lives in their community. These champions may have the influence to update public safety policies and procedures to create a more equitable and less stigmatized culture around harm reduction. For examples of public safety champions of harm reduction, read these [testimonials from North Carolina public safety personnel](#).

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- **Watch** The Power of Collaboration: Success Stories of Harm Reduction and Public Safety Partnerships to Prevent Overdose [webinar recording](#) to hear National Council grantees, Families Against Narcotics' Comeback Quick Response Team, and Catholic Community Services of Western Washington's Arrest and Jail Alternatives speak about their harm reduction-public safety partnerships.
- **Check out** the National Council's [public safety-led community-oriented overdose prevention efforts \(PS-COPE\) resources](#) to learn more about public safety collaborations with, and within, Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) communities.
- **Dive into** this [detailed guide](#) from the Department of Justice on how law enforcement and public health can work together to help PWUD.
- **Browse** the [Resource Library](#) from the Bureau of Justice Assistance's Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant and Substance Use Program (COSSUP).

REFERENCES

National Harm Reduction Coalition. (2020). Harm Reduction Principles. <https://harmreduction.org/about-us/principles-of-harm-reduction/>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2021). Harm Reduction Framework. <https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/harm-reduction-framework.pdf>

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