

The Vermont Department of Health, Divisions of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Programs (ADAP), Emergency Preparedness and Response and Injury Prevention (DEPRIP), and Health Surveillance have strengthened their partnership to address the increasing number of opioid overdoses during the time of COVID-19. A representative group from these divisions meet regularly to discuss and address challenges and gaps in services, to identify solutions and to support our community organizations. This document highlights the current initiatives from across the Health Department to address opioid overdoses.

KEY POINTS

- **Increasing types of services**
- **Improving access and reducing barriers to services**
- **Multifaceted & comprehensive approach**
- **Meeting individuals where they are at**

What initiatives are addressing opioid overdoses?

Naloxone Distribution

Vermont EMS are required to offer naloxone to any individuals who overdosed on opioids and have refused transportation to the hospital for additional care. This new protocol also requires naloxone leave behind kits to be provided to individuals who may exhibit other signs of opioid misuse when EMS arrives on scene for a non-overdose emergency. This could include signs of injection at the scene, or signs of injection on the individual's body.

Harm Reduction Packs include naloxone, fentanyl test strips, rescue breathing masks, and educational information. Packs are distributed through multiple locations including the General Assistance hotels. Additional distribution locations include probation and parole, Syringe Service Programs (SSPs), recovery centers, and shelters. Fentanyl test strips will continue beyond the pilot period designated by the legislature. This initiative was enhanced in response to COVID-19.

First Responder Naloxone Cards include treatment hub information on one side, and how to identify an overdose and use naloxone on the other. The cards are provided to 30 law enforcement agencies as a conversation and informational tool when working with the public.

Mobile syringe service exchanges are available through three Syringe Service Programs (SSPs): Vermont CARES, AIDS Project of Southern Vermont, and the HIV/HCV Resource Center (H2RC). These mobile exchanges help to meet the needs of Vermonters who are unable to access services through a fixed site location. The mobile exchanges provide sterile injection equipment, HIV/HCV tests, and naloxone to individuals either at their homes or in a public location (such as a parking lot) that is easily accessible. VDH is working with Safe Recovery to embed mobile exchanges in their program as well. This form of service played a critical role in keeping at risk individuals engaged in care when Stay Home Stay Safe orders in place in the midst of the COVID pandemic in Vermont.

Safety planning for clients is a priority for SSPs, treatment providers, and recovery center staff to reduce the risk of overdose or returning to use. This work was enhanced in response to COVID-19.

Overdose Messaging

KnowOD is a new opioid overdose prevention campaign reaching two primary audiences: those at risk of an overdose, and family and friends of those at risk of an overdose. Key messaging for those at risk of an overdose focuses on six overdose prevention and harm reduction tips:

1. Never use alone—if you OD while alone, you can die
2. Go slow— start with a small amount to test drug strength
3. Call 911—in case of an overdose
4. Use new syringes— to reduce risk of infections and help to protect vein health.
5. Test for fentanyl—fentanyl can be dangerous, so test with easy-to-use strips
6. Carry naloxone—Narcan® nasal spray can reverse an overdose

Messaging for family and friends also highlights steps that family and friends can take to lower a loved one's risk of a fatal overdose, including keeping naloxone on-hand (and knowing how to use), and calling 911. The messaging also reinforces that there are free resources, such as naloxone (Narcan®), available to them as well.

The campaign directs people to call or visit [VT Helplink](#) or visit www.knowodvt.com for more information and resources.

Community Support for Overdose Prevention

Community Action Grants have been awarded to four counties through the CDC Overdose Data to Action Grant. Bennington, Rutland, Windham and Windsor are currently in their second year of funding, which provides the flexibility to identify and implement the services and activities needed to address overdoses in their region.

Enhanced Linkage to Care Funding has been awarded to 11 grantees through a competitive Request for Proposals process utilizing CDC Overdose Data to Action Grant funding. The focus of these six-month grants (March 2021 – August 2021) is to quickly increase linkage to care support for individuals at risk of an overdose to decrease the number of opioid overdoses throughout the state. This opportunity was created in response to COVID-19.

Helping Vermont
communities respond
to opioid overdoses.

SAMHSA COVID Emergency Grant

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has provided a 25-month emergency grant to address the impact of COVID-19 on substance use and mental health in Vermont. The Department of Health is funding the following activities:

- Enhanced 24/7 substance use disorder emergency services in Bennington, Lamoille, Rutland and Windham/Windsor counties.
- Increased funding for recovery support outreach and services.
- Delivery of Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT).
- Increased promotion of [VT Helplink](#).

MAT and SSP Co-location Project

To increase the ability for direct referrals, ADAP and the Blueprint for Health are working with the treatment provider Better Life Partners and SSPs to co-locate. This will allow for the SSP provider to walk an individual interested in engaging in treatment to the MAT provider in the same building. As those engaged in SSP services may be less trusting of the treatment system overall, this direct connection between the SSP and treatment provider is anticipated to increase initiation and engagement in treatment services and reduce the number of opioid related overdoses.

ADAP and the Blueprint for Health are working with Better Life Partners to ensure the appropriate framework and support for these individuals is in place. Currently all three VT CARES SSP locations (Barre, Rutland, St. Johnsbury) are engaged with Better Life Partners, and planning has begun to integrate services with VT CARES' mobile SSP unit. AIDS Project in Southern Vermont is the second SSP to be brought onto this project. The HIV/HCV Resource Center (H2RC) has begun providing referrals to Better Life Partners as well.

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