

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The New Haven Health Department (NHHD) is well-versed in providing public health programs that support individuals with substance use disorder and opioid use disorder. From the late 1980's until 2016, NHHD operated the City's only syringe access program, which provided syringes/needles and safe injection equipment for individuals who injected drugs, provided the evidence-based program, Safety Counts, which aimed to reduce the risk of HIV among people who inject drugs by helping individuals develop personalized risk reduction plans, and directly linked individuals to substance use treatment programs. From 2017 to 2019, NHHD conducted community outreach and education on how to recognize and respond to an overdose, including the administration of naloxone, worked to reduce the stigma related to opioid use disorder, and, in collaboration with Quinnipiac Valley Health District (QVHD) and East Shore District Health Department, conducted annual DATA 2000 trainings for medical providers. During this time period, NHHD was one of the few health departments/districts in Connecticut to pilot-test the Syndromic Surveillance System. From 2020 to 2022, NHHD has further collaborated with QVHD to expand public awareness about the changing drug market, to provide residents with naloxone and overdose prevention training, and to educate residents and community-based organizations about the opioid epidemic.

The City of New Haven had the highest number of drug overdose fatalities in Connecticut in 2021, with 119 deaths (CT State Unintentional Drug Overdose Reporting System, 2021). Fentanyl is a significant factor contributing to the vast majority (105 out of 119) of overdose deaths that occurred in New Haven in 2021 (CT State Unintentional Drug Overdose Reporting System, 2021). In the Greater New Haven Community Wellbeing Index, one in three adults (30%) stated they knew someone who struggled with opioid misuse or addiction in the last year, with one in four (25%) reported that they knew at least one person who died of an opioid overdose (Data Haven, 2018).

The opioid crisis impacts every sector of society. To efficiently reach residents, NHHD partners with various stakeholders and providers who interact with the community on a regular basis. While there are various organizations that work to get out on the streets and target high-risk populations, QVHD and the NHHD target residents in need of treatment for substance use disorder and mental health and leverage city resources to coordinate efforts.

Monitoring and responding to recent trends and facilitating information sharing networks can help address the needs and concerns of local first responders and residents. Identifying needed trainings and supports is critical to help promote a compassionate response to overdose victims and their families, referrals to treatment and continued support for all involved. Through this grant, NHHD and QVHD will lead a task force of first responders and local stakeholders, including treatment centers and outreach groups, to effectively respond to sudden increases in overdoses. NHHD will ensure that efforts are not duplicated across the city and that public awareness is quickly heightened in response to spikes in overdoses which can be caused by increased contamination in the drug supply or other factors.

Addressing the stigma related to substance use disorder will also be a primary focus of the grant activities. Education addressing the norm of medication use and the dangers of medications, with an emphasis on mental health is dire, especially when it comes to protecting child safety. Encouraging conversations, eliminating feelings of shame, and approaching substance use disorder as a treatable medical condition requires collaboration across sectors.

Working with medical providers to increase access to medication assisted treatment for individuals with substance use disorder is another key component of the grant. By understanding the barriers to treatment for both patients and providers, potential sociological and systems changes can be identified to improve access and outcomes.