

PHAST Success Story: Overdose Response in Rural Connecticut

Background

From July 2022 to June 2023, the CDC Foundation funded three different communities around the country to support implementation of the Public Health and Safety Teams (PHAST) framework. One awardee was the Alliance for Prevention and Wellness, a Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinic in Middlesex County, Connecticut.

Middlesex County is a rural community of 72,901 people located in southeastern Connecticut. Like many communities across the United States, Middlesex County has seen a steady increase in overdose deaths over the past two decades. Mental health, substance use and counseling services are sparse due to a shortage of providers in this area. Individuals face additional challenges in obtaining services due to its rural nature and a lack of convenient and affordable transportation options. From 2018-2020, the county observed a spike in overdose fatalities, exceeding the national average, which propelled community partners to seek a national evidence-based model to better understand and respond to this growing epidemic in their county.

To combat the crisis, community leaders worked to organize efforts and increase the effectiveness of their overdose response task force. “The first goal of PHAST was to build upon that infrastructure and determine the community’s resources and capacity,” shared the public health analyst for the Overdose Response Strategy in Connecticut. “Our top priorities and goals were to grow the overdose task force. There are now several overdose outreach programs implemented in an area that previously had zero resources.”

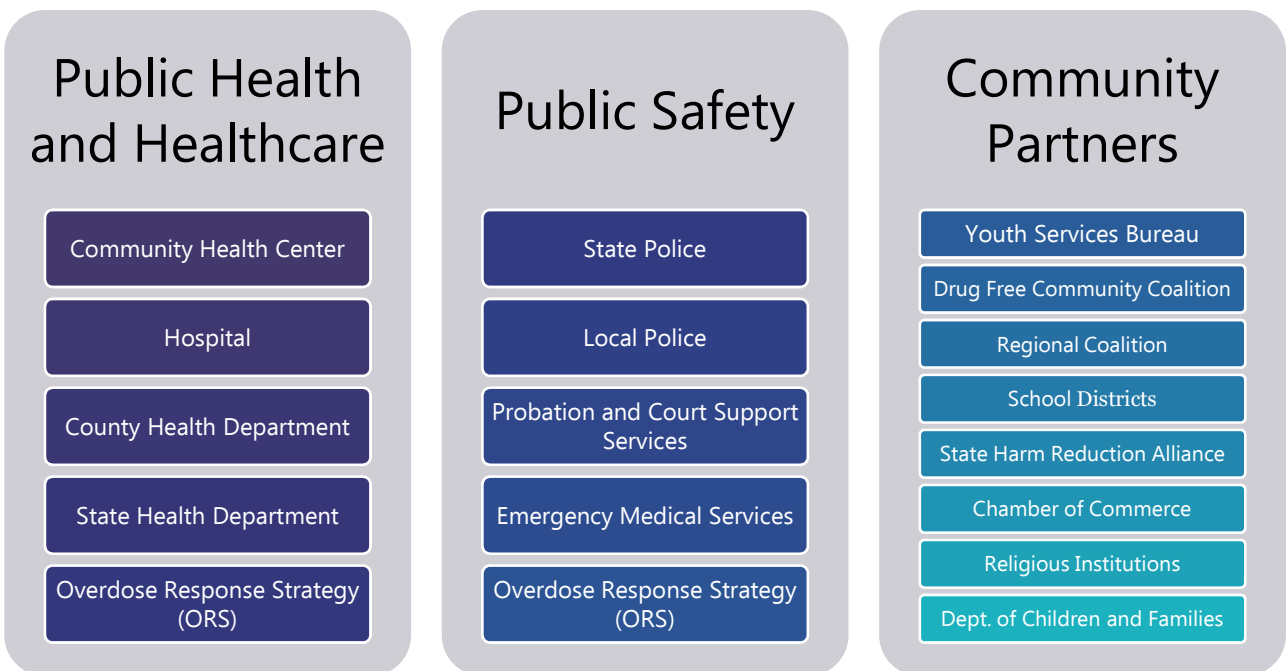
To better understand the community’s capacity to respond to overdoses and serve the community, the PHAST conducted a capacity survey of 41 community partner organizations. The survey allowed team members to collect and review community-wide data related to substance use, overdose prevention and response and gaps in services. The results were then used to inform and prioritize interventions such as, improving access to naloxone for overdose survivors and their families, increase promotion and availability of harm reduction services and train law enforcement in trauma-informed care.

Survey results also showed a lack of knowledge about [Overdose Fatality Review](#) (OFR) and its impact on overdose preventions. An OFR brings together a multidisciplinary group of community partners who meet monthly to examine and discuss individual overdose death cases with a goal of better understanding risk factors and circumstances that led to these fatalities. As a result of the survey the PHAST held a mock OFR meeting to provide context and further engage community members in the process. The activity was well received and concluded with a recommendation for the county to establish an OFR to better identify opportunities to prevent future overdoses in Middlesex County.

Building Capacity

By 2022, Middlesex PHAST team members represented 17 agencies and included 23 individuals from various state, local, regional and community organizations with diverse backgrounds and perspectives, including, as recommended, people who have experienced substance use. Members meet monthly to review and discuss data, address knowledge and service gaps and collectively identify opportunities to improve the overdose task force.

The public health analyst for the Overdose Response Strategy explained, “We started with zero members when the PHAST program began so growing our capacity was important as well as conducting our organizational capacity survey.” The Middlesex PHAST plans to conduct a resource assessment to help organizations deepen their approach to be able to respond to overdoses, delivering support and resources and implementing overdose prevention strategies.



Lessons Learned

The PHAST team identified some valuable lessons to share with other communities implementing the PHAST framework.

- **At first, your PHAST may grow more quickly than your capacity.** “We’ve received so much support and PHAST grew so quickly and so many people wanted to be involved. It was a shocking lesson for me because I wasn’t anticipating such a strong, positive response. But it takes time to build these initiatives while combating the stigma in some areas,” explained the director of the Alliance for Prevention and Wellness.
- **Know the readiness of your community before launching into programs.** The Middlesex PHAST conducted a community assessment prior to beginning their programs and interventions. “One of the reasons why our PHAST has been so successful is because we had a good pulse on what was needed in the community,” shared the public health analyst for the Overdose Response Strategy.
- **Ensure leadership buy-in and focus on solutions that directly address overdoses.** “It’s important to know the opinions and attitudes of the local police department, community leaders and politicians and their stance on some of these issues. And always focus on assessing the actual problem,” states the public health analyst for the Overdose Response Strategy. The Middlesex PHAST did this by completing activities in the PHAST Toolkit and creating a shared understanding of the problems facing the community. Developing trust with PHAST members also creates space to have difficult but necessary conversations to advance the shared goals.

Conclusion

The Middlesex PHAST plans to continue to use the data collected in their capacity survey to bring in new partners. They are also working to secure resources to increase the number of emergency medical services (EMS) providers that leave behind naloxone and educational materials on substance use disorder (SUD) for individuals who experienced an overdose. “So that’s where we’re moving with PHAST; to push more of those resources and focus on engagement, while continuing to sustain these groups and efforts,” explained the director of the Alliance for Prevention and Wellness. With some of the immediate priorities addressed, the PHAST has now shifted its focus to identifying additional data-driven approaches to overdose prevention, while maintaining momentum within the group.