

PHAST Success Story: Peer Response in Rural Wisconsin

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 Winnebago County Health Department in Wisconsin.

Winnebago County is a rural community of 167,000 people located in southeastern Wisconsin. Like many communities across the United States, Winnebago County has seen a steady increase in overdose deaths over the past two decades. In 2017, the county observed a spike in these fatalities, spurring community partners to seek a national evidence-based model to better understand and respond to this growing epidemic in their county.

To begin to address the crisis, community leaders established an [Overdose Fatality Review \(OFR\)](#) team in early 2018. The OFR process brings together a multidisciplinary group of community partners who meet to examine and discuss individual overdose death cases with a goal of better understanding risk factors and circumstances leading to these fatalities. This discussion allows local organizations to identify strategies to prevent future overdoses.

However, overdose deaths continued to increase. Members of the OFR team began to realize that this process offered only a glimpse into Winnebago's overdose epidemic. "We didn't want to wait until people died, we wanted to look at data and be preventive in our approach to overdoses," explained the OFR Facilitator.

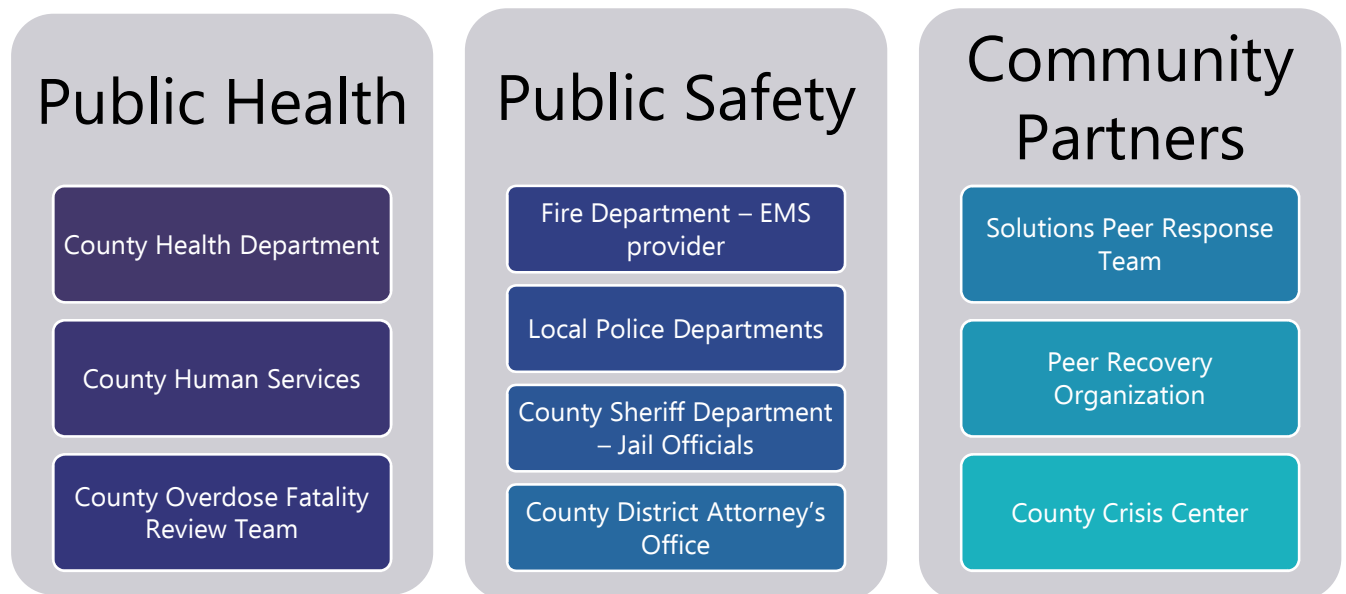
To better understand the needs of Winnebago County residents and identify additional opportunities to prevent overdose deaths, members of the local OFR team conducted more than 30 interviews with community partners. The team focused on gathering recommendations to develop next steps, design an implementation strategy and build a team to lead the plan.

Community partners recommended the county establish a rapid response team, emphasizing the importance of recruiting individuals who have lived experience of substance use. These findings were the catalyst for the development of a local PHAST.

Centering Peer Leaders

In 2021, the Winnebago PHAST was established as a data-driven, action-oriented workgroup that provides strategic direction, continuous improvement and assists in the evaluation of the peer response team program. PHAST members represent 13 different agencies and include individuals with diverse backgrounds and perspectives, including people with lived experience of substance use. Members meet to review and discuss data, address knowledge gaps and collectively identify opportunities to improve the peer response team program, acting as “connectors” among siloed community systems throughout the county.

The communications director for the county health department, described that over a one-year period, “the peer response team and PHAST have created an effort led by people with lived experience that can be adapted by public health and public safety, which are historically siloed sectors.” PHAST allows the partners to work together to identify gaps and move quickly to establish connections and implement appropriate interventions.



Keys to Success

The PHAST team identified some critical steps that have led to their successes:

- **Community members with lived experience can share stories of recovery helps reach partners on a personal level.** One important insight was ensuring that leadership within

each sector understands the value of peer-led work in the community. The OFR facilitator shared that “once staff have a greater awareness of the needs of people with substance use, they are willing to create inroads for community providers to talk to clients about recovery options, harm reduction and provide the supports and resources they need.”

- **Building relationships with new partners catalyzes innovative programs and collaboration.** While reviewing data shared by the peer response team program, PHAST members realized that they did not have access to the county’s emergency shelter utilization data. To address the knowledge gap about shelter clients’ needs, they invited shelter staff to join the PHAST. PHAST enables coordination across partners and catalyzed a partnership allowing the peer response team to visit the shelter to establish new programs that meet clients’ needs.

To address overdoses by people recently released from incarceration, the PHAST approached the local jail to discuss how they might work collaboratively. Through these meetings, they were able to develop a program to distribute medication assisted treatment (MAT) within the facility. “Meeting people like the jail administrator and being able to trust each other and say, let’s figure out a different way. The peer response team is the glue that connects these groups,” shared the OFR facilitator.

- **Gain buy-in from all levels of an organization, especially staff leading the programs, not just leadership to keep momentum.** Fostering strong and effective multi-sector partnerships is crucial to this work and requires commitment and effort from all partners. “PHAST has taught me that relationships are key. We need buy-in from all stakeholders because it takes everyone to be on board and more than one system to help someone,” shared the program director and peer response team coordinator. The OFR facilitator emphasized the importance of engaging not only leadership, but also front-line staff: “They’re the ones that we work with who need to believe in the program. I think that’s what made our rapid response program with EMS so successful.”

Conclusion

The Winnebago PHAST continues to meet regularly to review peer response team program data and identify opportunities to improve and expand program services. Over the past few months, the PHAST has focused on connecting with community members after arrest and incarceration. Through the PHAST, they are in the process of formalizing partnerships with law enforcement to engage with people at risk of overdose prior to arrest.