The Whole Agency Approach
Why First Responders?

Preventing overdose requires a comprehensive community-based approach. Healthcare workers, peer recovery specialists, people who use drugs and their family and friends, case managers, and yes, first responders all have an important role to play. Fire and EMS agencies often conduct non-emergent outreach to address needs of the community and post-overdose outreach can be included among these services. First responders have unique assets that make them well-suited for post overdose outreach including access to 911 data, a community service mindset, and the public trust and approval that develops when timely and equitable services are provided during often stressful and challenging experiences.

Is your fire and EMS agency trusted by people who use drugs in your community? Start by speaking with harm reduction organizations and others directly serving people who use drugs to determine how you can help prevent overdoses. People who use drugs may have had negative or event traumatic experiences with first responders and it’s important to consider when and how first responders are best able to provide support. This document provides a whole agency approach to post-overdose outreach developed by the Milwaukee Fire Department to assist you in tailoring a program to your community’s needs.

Developing the Approach

As first responders, you have the lived experience and associated data/statistics to drive an outreach program. Do you have the capacity, training and authorization needed to take the next steps? Obtaining internal and external support for the program is paramount and you must also consider funding needs. Using your data and preliminary research will help you gain a foothold with your administrators and budget managers. Provide examples of other effective programs and efforts and prepare to submit preliminary budget needs including salaries, equipment, and training.

Obtain support from your membership, including labor union representation. Use your data to highlight the need for the program and why this effort will not only benefit the community, but also your organization. For example, has your cohort been experiencing an increased need for responses, in addition to staffing and other budgetary cuts?

Community of Solution

As first responders, you are well versed in how to interact with other public safety services. How well do you know other public and private agencies involved in substance use and behavioral health within your community? A key factor in making your overdose outreach effective will be to identify, engage, and partner with as many of those individuals, agencies, and services as possible. Understanding what you will be able to accomplish is imperative, and knowing what harm reduction, treatment, and social services exist within your community helps guide the program goals. Identifying partners committed to taking an active and actionable role, holding ongoing collaborative meetings with implementing partners, and seeking feedback on your approach from people who use drugs informs the structure and implementation of the program.
Putting it Together

*How well versed is your organization with privacy laws and liability?* Legal measures such as memorandums of understanding and business associate agreements will need to be completed with partnering agencies to comply with program business and interagency exchange of protected information covered under the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and Substance Abuse Confidentiality Regulations (CFR 42 Part 2). Indemnity agreements often address civilian ride-along in program vehicles. Once those are in place, establish an initial plan of action, including how you will document your efforts, who will provide peer support services, and how you will provide transport to treatment. A pilot program can be implemented to test what works and what will need to be adjusted in this plan of action. Moving forward at a measured and reviewed pace will benefit the program’s success and sustainability.

The Future

It is important to continue engaging new partners to remain up to date with community happenings and changes in the world of substance use disorder. Compile your data and share it. Show that you have made a difference and play an important role in reducing overdoses in your community. Continue to seek funding and support from your administration and community. Remain responsive to feedback. You may discover that your efforts will be appreciated more from outside of your agency than within. Be prepared to defend your data and engage skeptics that question why fire and EMS first responders should be involved in an area that has traditionally been driven by public health departments. All public agencies can and should work together for the common need of their communities.