

Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA)

Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Program (COSSUP)

San Antonio, Texas, Fire Department, Mobile Integrated Health Division: "Harm Reduction," the New "Fire Prevention"

January 2024

Written by Andrew Estrada, Deputy Fire Chief,
San Antonio, Texas, Fire Department

For years, the American Fire Service has successfully implemented fire prevention programs that reach every elementary school in the nation. Conversely, the fire service has not embraced the notion that "fire prevention" is another way of saying "harm reduction." Harm reduction incorporates an array of strategies, including safer use of drugs, managed use, and meeting people who use drugs "where they are at" to provide the tools and support needed to help reduce the risks they face while trying to recover.

In 2018, the San Antonio Fire Department (SAFD) Mobile Integrated Health (MIH) program, in collaboration with the University of Texas Health Science Center School of Nursing and Office of the Medical Director, developed the department's Texas Targeted Opioid Response (TTOR) program. The goal of this program is to work toward stabilizing patients with a history of opioid use in a pre-hospital setting and refer them to a facility to assist with the long-term rehabilitation and recovery. The SAFD MIH team compiles a list of patients to contact within a few

days after SAFD Fire or Emergency Medical Services (EMS) administers Narcan for an opioid reversal during an emergency response. The patients who qualify for the TTOR program have a history of having Narcan administered by EMS staff, family, friends, or other first responders. Patients may also qualify for the program if they have been seen at an emergency department for an overdose and are recommended as part of their discharge plan. The MIH TTOR program aims to be the bridge between overdose and the counseling/recovery center, distribution of Narcan, and education of patients and families.

Within a year of operating the TTOR program, the MIH team recognized the need for another viable option to assist patients who wanted counseling and treatment but required more immediate treatment to curb their opioid addiction. In 2019, the SAFD MIH division started a medication-assisted treatment (MAT) program with the intent of providing in-field induction of Suboxone to assist patients awaiting treatment.

From October 2021 through September 2022, the SAFD EMS division responded to 3,480 overdoses, with the SAFD MIH team able to contact 1,703, or



49 percent, of those individuals within a few days after their initial emergency. In that time, the TTOR team made 1,419 contacts with 842 unique patients and the MAT team made 1,854 contacts with 861 unique patients, many of whom received in-field Suboxone induction. Of the 1,703 patients admitted into the TTOR and MAT programs, 315, or 19 percent, were referred for counseling and/or treatment.

Fire and EMS agencies across the country are in a unique position to assist existing community partners with harm reduction strategies. We can either keep responding to the cycle of 9-1-1 calls for overdoses, or we can get involved as arguably the most trusted members of our communities to help bridge the gap to assistance. The problem is not likely to go away, so are we ready to make “fire prevention” synonymous with “harm reduction”?

Visit the Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Program (COSSUP) Resource Center at www.cossup.org.

About COSSUP

COSSUP has transitioned from the Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Abuse Program (COSSAP). This change in title for the program is indicative of efforts to reduce the stigma related to substance use and to support impacted people in their recovery journey.

About TASC’s Center for Health and Justice (CHJ)

CHJ helps COSSUP grantees implement evidence-based, systemic solutions at the front end of the justice system to respond to the substance use that often underlies criminal justice involvement. CHJ helps build integrated criminal justice, behavioral health, and community systems by assisting first responders in developing pathways to treatment for individuals at risk for illicit substance use and misuse. CHJ offers online resources and in-person training and technical assistance (TTA) engagements customized to the needs of specific jurisdictions with the goals of connecting and maximizing the treatment resources of the community to improve public health and safety. Request TTA from CHJ by contacting the COSSUP Project Lead, Hope Fiori, at hfiori@tasc.org.

About BJA

The Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) provides leadership and services in grant administration and criminal justice policy development to support local, state, and tribal law enforcement in achieving safer communities. To learn more about BJA, visit www.bja.gov and follow us on Facebook (www.facebook.com/DOJBJA) and X (formerly known as Twitter) (@DOJBJA). BJA is part of the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Justice Programs.

This work was supported by a grant from the Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The points of view in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.