

## CASE STUDY

# Building Mutually Beneficial Partnerships With Universities—A Focus on the Martinsburg, West Virginia, Initiative

May 2024

There has been a recent groundswell in the number of community organizations that are developing innovative, multisectoral collaborations to advance health and well-being in their communities and provide solutions to complex challenges such as substance use disorder (SUD) and the overdose epidemic.<sup>1,2,3</sup> The Martinsburg, West Virginia, Initiative (TMI) is one such collaboration. TMI has engaged Shepherd University, located in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, in efforts to support evaluation and workforce development. Dynamic partnerships between police, educators, and community and public health organizations work together to build the capacity of the local workforce, primarily social workers, to respond to the needs of the community and support youth and families. To date, TMI has trained more than 15 social work interns through this partnership and has responded to more than 433 referrals for students and families.<sup>4</sup>

TMI is a community-based effort to break the cycle of SUD and build strong families. The initiative is based on research linking adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) with a range of negative outcomes during adulthood, such as reduced employment rates,

increased risk of chronic diseases, and increased risk of mental health problems.<sup>5</sup> Shepherd University provides TMI with support using data analytics and evaluation measures to strengthen implementation and sustainability. The TMI partnerships are strengthened through regular collaborative meetings to provide opportunities for different sectors to share updates and resources with each other. TMI also has a diverse board including representation from the Berkeley County School District, Shepherd University, the Recovery Resource Center, the Martinsburg Police Department, Washington, D.C./Baltimore, Maryland, High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas (HIDTA), the Boys & Girls Club, West Virginia University Medicine, and the Berkeley-Morgan County, West Virginia, Health Department. In addition, TMI leverages four major partnerships with Berkeley County Schools, the Martinsburg Police Department, Washington/Baltimore HIDTA, and Shepherd University.<sup>6</sup> The initiative offers programming in schools and through community partners, along with a number of other support services.

TMI utilizes social workers to deliver many of its services because they are uniquely positioned to

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provide trauma-informed care while promoting social change and development. Indeed, licensed social workers play key roles in the various services that TMI supports. These include:

- A social worker embedded within the city police department to support interactions that involve minors.
- Social workers in the schools to provide on-site support to students as well as small groups focused on building social and emotional skills and parenting classes.
- Social workers as trainers to deliver training for community members, teachers, first responders, and others on topics like ACEs and trauma-informed services.

To expand its workforce and develop the capacity of social work students, TMI has partnered with the Shepherd University Social Work Program. This partnership, which grew out of an effort to measure the initiative's impact, hosts social work interns and provides them with opportunities to earn their practicum/practice hours through an internship with TMI. Through this arrangement, one social work student per year is matched with TMI. The student is supervised by a licensed, master's-level social worker on staff and receives ongoing mentorship and support during the internship. Through the practicum, student interns have an opportunity to progress from shadowing another provider to providing services to students themselves. This type of experience provides students with a real-world understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the licensed social workers employed by TMI. This partnership has allowed TMI to expand its services in the community while building the capacity of the future workforce. In several cases, TMI has hired student interns as full-time employees after

graduation and as funds allow. This type of matching can decrease recruitment costs for the organization and increase job satisfaction among employees.

Shepherd University and TMI continue to explore opportunities for increasing the capacity of local community members to support the health and well-being of the community. Recent efforts have included partnering with professors of psychology and social work to provide information to middle school and high school students about behavioral health professions. University students also participate in campus tabling events such as resource fairs and special school events, where they set up resource tables with brochures and giveaways to share information with individuals who may be considering a career in these areas. Career exploration and tabling events are hosted for middle school, high school, and university students.

TMI has also partnered with Shepherd University to provide training on trauma-informed care to university students majoring in education and sociology. Through 2022, TMI trained 79 students in trauma-informed care and ACEs. Evaluation data suggest that the training resulted in increased knowledge of ACEs and the potential impact of trauma on learning among the student participants.<sup>7</sup> Partnering with Shepherd University has allowed TMI to access a trained and eager workforce to expand its services. In return, the partnership has enabled Shepherd University to offer its students practical, in-field experience.

## **Tips and Strategies for Building Partnerships**

The partnership between Shepherd University and TMI is rooted in relationships and benefits for both partners. It has grown over time as community needs have emerged along with new funding opportunities—expanding from an initial focus on measuring the

partnership's impact to supporting implementation and workforce development efforts. The success of the partnership between Shepherd University and TMI is built on key strategies that are supported by best practices<sup>8,9</sup> These include the following:

- Common interests: Evaluation and measuring impact was identified as a key goal of TMI from the beginning. This provided the initial opening for a university-community partnership.
- Strong and ongoing relationships: Dr. Virginia Hicks, former assistant provost for academic community outreach and department chair of the Social Work Program at Shepherd University, was an active member of the TMI collaborative, serving as a board member since its inception until her retirement. She engaged other university staff members in the work as well and supported efforts to expand the partnership beyond its initial vision. Currently, Dr. Geri Crawley-Woods, retired department chair of the Social Work Program, serves as the collaborating member of the Shepherd University-TMI partnership.
- Reciprocal benefits: TMI is able to recruit highly qualified staff members and offer students an important practice-based experience that is required for graduation.
- Successful buy-in: The Shepherd University-TMI partnership started small and expanded as partners worked together to identify additional opportunities that would be beneficial. Starting small ensured that both partners could fulfill their roles.
- Effective use of available resources: TMI has been able to leverage the data collected and analyzed by Shepherd University to obtain

additional funding and expand its community programming. This has enabled the initiative to expand its partnership with Shepherd University. For example, the recent efforts to increase student awareness of and interest in behavioral health-related jobs has helped TMI achieve its goal of empowering the community while amplifying the voice and expertise of student interns and Shepherd University graduates.

*Margaret Kursey, Executive Director of TMI, recommends starting by building relationships: "The biggest thing is to focus on building relationships. I would recommend firstly to have the director reach out to the [university] president and start to form a relationship, meet, and talk to them to share the mission and think of one thing the university can do to help the organization accomplish and build on the strengths of the organization."*

## Conclusion

Bringing Shepherd University into the initiative as a major partner has enabled both TMI and the university to expand their work in Martinsburg and serves as an example to other communities that are considering partnerships with higher education to meet the diverse needs of youth and families in addressing SUDs. The following resources provide insights and recommendations for how to get started with this process:

- *Field Guide for Urban University-Community Partnerships*: <https://iasculture.org/research/publications/thriving-cities-field-guide>

- Community Partnerships Knowledge Hub from Campus Compact: [https://compact.org/resources/community-partnerships-knowledge-hub?f%5B0%5D=practice\\_area%3A190&f%255B0%255D%3Dpractice\\_area=190](https://compact.org/resources/community-partnerships-knowledge-hub?f%5B0%5D=practice_area%3A190&f%255B0%255D%3Dpractice_area=190)
- The Martinsburg Initiative: <https://themartinsburginitiative.com/>
- Shepherd University Social Work Program: <https://www.shepherd.edu/social-work>

## Endnotes

1. Au-Yeung, C., Blewett, L. A., and Lange, K., (2019), "Addressing the Rural Opioid Addiction and Overdose Crisis Through Cross-sector Collaboration: Little Falls, Minnesota," *American Journal of Public Health* 109(2): 260–262, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2018.304789>.

2. Carter, A., and Soucier, S. D., (2022), "Public Health and Public Safety Partnerships: Addressing the Overdose Crisis in Maine," JPHMP Direct, <https://jphmpdirect.com/public-health-and-public-safety-partnerships-addressing-the-overdose-crisis-in-maine/>.

3. Shutz, B., and Roe, S. S., (2022), "Piloting a Data-driven Multisector Framework to Address the Overdose Epidemic," JPHMP Direct, retrieved July 26, 2023, from <https://jphmpdirect.com/piloting-a-data-driven-multisector-framework-to-address-the-overdose-epidemic/>.

4. Wisdom, A. C., Villamil, V., Govindu, M., Kursey, M., Peppard, L., Bates, R. A., Myrick, A., Snyder, C., and Noonan, R. K., (2022), "The Martinsburg Initiative: A Collaboration Between Public Safety, Public Health, and Schools to Address Trauma and Substance Use,"

*Journal of Public Health Management and Practice* 28(Supplement 6): S355–S358, <https://doi.org/10.1097/PHH.0000000000001591>.

5. National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Division of Violence Prevention, (2019), *Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs): Leveraging the Best Available Evidence*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/82316>.

6. The Martinsburg Initiative, retrieved July 26, 2023, from <https://themartinsburginitiative.com/>.

7. See note 4 above, Wisdom et al., "The Martinsburg Initiative: A Collaboration Between Public Safety, Public Health, and Schools to Address Trauma and Substance Use," S355–S358.

8. Newman, C., (2019), "A Fresh Look at University-Community Partnerships Across the Country," *UVAToday*, retrieved July 26, 2023, from <https://news.virginia.edu/content/fresh-look-university-community-partnerships-across-country>.

9. Yates, J. J., and Accardi, M., (2019), *Field Guide for Urban University-Community Partnerships*, Thriving Cities Lab, Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, University of Virginia, <https://iasculture.org/research/publications/thriving-cities-field-guide>.

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

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