



Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA)-Supported  
Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Abuse Program (COSSAP)  
**Successful Strategies for Addressing the Opioid Epidemic in Rural Communities: Harm Reduction**

The **Rural Responses to the Opioid Epidemic (RROE) project**, co-funded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the State Justice Institute, supports 21 rural sites across the country to develop or enhance efforts to strengthen epidemiologic surveillance and public health data infrastructure; implement effective community-level opioid overdose prevention activities; and establish or enhance public safety, public health, and behavioral health collaborations. Sites may also expand peer recovery and recovery support services that help people start and stay in recovery.

Learn more about the RROE project at <https://rural.cossapresources.org/>.

Harm reduction is a proactive and evidence-based approach to reducing the negative personal and public health impacts of behavior associated with alcohol and other substance use at both the individual and community levels. Harm-reduction services save lives by being available and accessible to people and emphasizing the need for humility and compassion toward people who use drugs. Harm reduction plays a significant role in preventing drug-related deaths and offering access to health care, social services, and treatment. This results in a reduction of overdose

fatalities, acute life-threatening infections related to unsterile drug injection, and chronic diseases, such as HIV/HCV.<sup>1</sup>

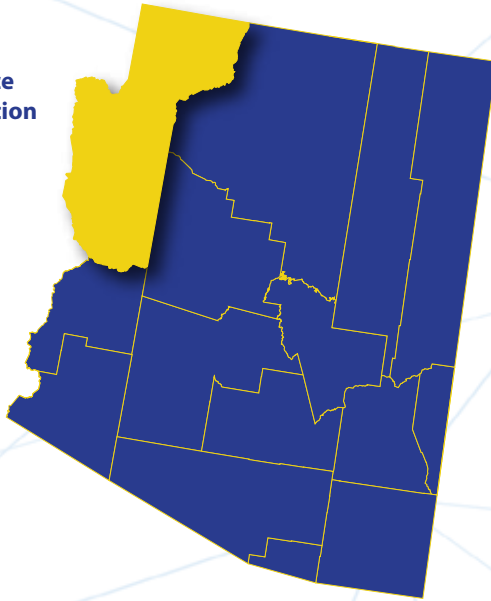
Rural communities across the country are implementing harm-reduction programs to better serve residents with substance use disorder (SUD) and make more efficient use of limited resources. This brief is one in a series highlighting projects that are part of the RROE project.

<sup>1</sup> SAMHSA, April 2022, "Harm Reduction," retrieved June 7, 2022 from <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/harm-reduction>.

**Topics in *Successful Strategies for Addressing the Opioid Epidemic in Rural Communities* Series**

- Engaging With Faith-Based Organizations
- Law Enforcement- and First Responder-Led Diversion Programs
- Engaging the Local Business Community
- Youth and Families Prevention and Intervention
- Harm Reduction
- Transportation
- Response Teams
- Jail-Based Programming

**Mohave Substance  
Treatment Education  
and Prevention  
Partnership**



## Mohave Substance Treatment and Education Prevention Partnership

Mohave County, Arizona, is the fifth-largest county geographically in the United States, spanning 13,461 miles with a population of approximately 200,000 people. It includes part of the Mohave Desert and is home to three Indian reservations. In 2018, Mohave County had the highest overdose death rate per capita of the 15 counties located in the state. Since the governor declared a state of emergency on June 15, 2017, there have been 570 opioid overdoses in Mohave County, with 342 occurring in 2018. Mohave County was identified as having four of the top ten opioid prescribers in the state, with prescribing rates 40 percent higher than the state average. However, since then, there has been a steady decrease in overdoses, with 2020 being the lowest rate at 78 overdoses. Robert DeVries is the project coordinator for the RROE grant and the [Mohave Substance Treatment and Education Prevention Partnership's \(MSTEPP\)](#) only employee, but his background in law enforcement and his active role in serving on the business and government relations committee for the local Chamber of

Commerce makes DeVries and MSTEPP critical assets for harm-reduction work in the Mohave County community.

As with many communities around the country, Mohave County has some stigma surrounding harm-reduction implementation. DeVries' first step was getting buy-in from the community. "This area is a very conservative area, so to talk about harm reduction in the community can be a challenge in itself," he says. However, he can relate to their reluctance to get on board. "A few years ago, I can honestly tell you that I was not a proponent of MAT [medication-assisted treatment]. I was not a proponent of harm reduction. However, I had excellent teachers and excellent mentors that showed me my wrong thought pattern, and because of that, I understood. It is hard to refute the evidence that is there and the success that is there with both of those programs," says DeVries.

*"By letting people know, 'I have been in your shoes, and here is why I feel it is important now,' . . . It's a disease, and it's a public health issue because Mohave county lies in the top ten percent in the nation for the potential for a hepatitis or HIV outbreak. We aren't just trying to help the individual; we are trying to help the community as a whole to stay safe."*

—Robert DeVries, Project Coordinator

"I believe that has been better accepted and allowed us to make significant progress," he says. Getting community buy-in for harm reduction relies heavily on the business community to get the ball rolling. MSTEPP focused on two initiatives they wanted to highlight to the business communities, organizations, and even the home environments. The first is stocking your first aid kit in preparation for a potential overdose. "Naloxone is now the

new Band-Aid of the future for your first-aid kit. It is crucial to have, and it's the best thing available to have in those situations," says DeVries. The second is for businesses and organizations that have an automated external defibrillator (AED) to attach a naloxone kit to the AED. The first organization to jump on that recommendation was the county jail.

The support from and partnership with the Chamber of Commerce has been integral in setting the example for businesses and organizations in the community to get on board with harm reduction. MSTEPP has conducted several virtual and in-person trainings with the chamber, including naloxone administration. MSTEPP and the Chamber of Commerce have worked together over the last 15 years to orchestrate the "Walk Away from Drugs" event that draws a crowd of 1500 to 2000 people annually. The event brings together students, businesses, and residents; everyone works together for a large-scale event to highlight the dangers of substance misuse, as well as prevention, treatment, and recovery aspects in a community-wide celebration.

Outreach outside of the business community is also integral to the MSTEPP harm-reduction program's success. MSTEPP does not have a physical office, so a partnership with an organization that does have a physical office was important to establish—to get naloxone out into the community. A youth-oriented organization, Arizona Youth Partnership, has agreed to establish a memorandum of understanding to have them act as the distribution site on behalf of MSTEPP. The Mohave County School Superintendent's office also agreed to step in and serve as the distribution point for smaller school districts. To date, 742 kits have been distributed. Public awareness campaigns are another component of MSTEPP's community outreach initiative. With Arizona being a border state and

seeing a large number of counterfeit pills laced with fentanyl moving through the community, statewide campaigns were launched to inform the public of the increased risks of overdose. One of the most heavily trafficked highways in America, Route 66, runs through the state and is a perfect opportunity to spread the "One Pill Can Kill" message developed by statewide coalition leaders through a billboard campaign. It is estimated the billboards are seen by approximately 44,000 motorists every week.

MSTEPP was also able to incorporate harm reduction in the Mohave County schools. The death of a 15-year-old in 2021 prompted the conversation to begin overdose-prevention efforts in the schools. The potential for school-aged kids to obtain the counterfeit pills within the home and bring them on campus was too high to ignore. "We felt that it wasn't a matter of if it was going to occur, but when, and to be better prepared for it. It was unanimously decided to train key personnel in both of those school districts and supplied them with naloxone to have available in their facilities," says DeVries. In addition, there is also a "Reality Day" that is held for eighth-grade students in the district. The students obtain an occupation, a wage, and a marital status and visit different "stations" to make major life decisions. They can determine if they will buy or rent a home, have children, or adopt a pet, for example. MSTEPP is the last station students visit and have the "wheel of life" that students spin. The wheel contains life situations like a car breaking down or maybe a monetary gift from a family member that affects their financial situation. One space on the wheel represents addiction, where the student loses everything. This opens the conversation with the students about drugs and addiction. The event is always a success.

With the partnerships made between MSTEPP and local organizations, like the Chamber of Commerce, the school districts, and the law enforcement community, harm-reduction efforts in Mohave County have made tremendous progress. In 2016, the law enforcement community did not carry or understand the benefit of naloxone. "In 5 years, we went from introducing it, and now, it is part of the state accreditation process. It will become a national best practice for law enforcement agencies in Arizona," says DeVries.

## Lessons Learned

**Relationships with businesses are vital.** Reaching out to the Chamber of Commerce, meeting with them, and understanding their needs are imperative. Being a part of that committee gave DeVries a leg up. MSTEPP has been transparent with the Chamber of Commerce about its plans for implementing harm reduction in the community and in turn, gaining their support.

**Get everyone on the same page.** Education in the community is important to get buy-in and support. The billboard campaigns in the area are a component of education about the dangers of counterfeit pills and the higher potential for

overdose, but clarity on laws and regulations is something programs need to consider. When working with the business community, for example, MSTEPP has had to work to give them an understanding of the Good Samaritan laws in the state that would hold them harmless in regards to rendering aid and offering assistance.

**Get involved in the community.** Being embedded in different areas and focuses within the community and not just in substance use-related efforts will build a rapport with community members and leaders. This, in turn, can make them more receptive to other projects like harm reduction.

Visit the COSSAP Resource Center at [www.cossapresources.org](http://www.cossapresources.org).

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