

The Vermont Department of Health, Divisions of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Programs (ADAP), Emergency Preparedness and Response and Injury Prevention (DEPRIP), and Health Surveillance have strengthened their partnership to address the increasing number of opioid overdoses during the time of COVID-19. Representatives from these divisions meet regularly to discuss and address challenges and gaps in services, to identify solutions and to support our community organizations. This document highlights the current initiatives from across the Health Department to address opioid overdoses.

KEY POINTS

- **Increasing types of services**
- **Improving access and reducing barriers to services**
- **Multifaceted & comprehensive approach**
- **Meeting people where they are at**

What initiatives are addressing opioid overdoses?

Naloxone Distribution

Vermont EMS is required to offer naloxone to any person who overdosed on opioids and have refused transportation to the hospital for additional care. Beginning in 2020, this protocol also requires naloxone leave behind kits to be provided to people who may exhibit other signs of opioid misuse when EMS (emergency medical services) arrives on scene for a non-overdose emergency. The naloxone leave behind kits may also be given to a bystander or family member who may be in a position to save a life.

Community Based Distribution of Narcan® Kits is intended to ensure those who may have the opportunity to intervene with an opioid overdose have Narcan® available to do so. This means any individual who believes they could help someone at risk of an opioid overdose, or who are at risk of an opioid overdose themselves are eligible. It should be noted that fentanyl is being found in many illicit substances, not just heroin. Those using substances not purchased at a pharmacy are encouraged to receive Narcan® and teach loved ones where it is kept and how to use it in case of an unintentional overdose.

Harm Reduction Packs include naloxone, fentanyl test strips, rescue breathing mouth barriers, and educational information. Packs are distributed through multiple locations including the General Assistance hotels. Additional distribution locations include probation and parole, Syringe Service Programs (SSPs), recovery centers, and shelters. Fentanyl test strips will continue beyond the pilot period designated by the legislature. This initiative was enhanced in response to COVID-19.

First Responder Naloxone Cards include treatment hub information on one side, and how to identify an overdose and use naloxone on the other side. The cards are provided to law enforcement agencies and other interested organizations as a conversation and informational tool when working with the public.

Mobile syringe service exchanges are available through all of Vermont’s Syringe Service Programs (SSPs): Vermont CARES, AIDS Project of Southern Vermont, the HIV/HCV Resource Center (H2RC), and Howard Center Safe Recovery. These mobile exchanges help to meet the needs of Vermonters who are unable to access services through a fixed site location. The mobile exchanges provide sterile injection equipment, HIV/HCV tests, and naloxone to people either at their homes or in a public location (such as a parking lot) that is easily accessible. This form of service played a critical role in keeping at risk individuals engaged in care when Stay Home Stay Safe orders were in place during the COVID pandemic in Vermont.

Overdose Outreach is a new initiative between the Health Department and Vermont’s four syringe service programs (SSPs). Through this initiative the SSPs are developing a program to actively reach people who are not connected to services to provide naloxone, harm reduction education and strategies, and information on treatment, and recovery services. The intention is to build trust and awareness of SSP services and engage people in ongoing harm reduction strategies.

Safety planning for clients is a priority for SSPs, treatment providers, and recovery center staff to reduce the risk of overdose or returning to use. This work was enhanced in response to COVID-19.

Overdose Messaging

KnowOD is an opioid overdose prevention campaign reaching two primary audiences: people at risk of an overdose, and their family and friends. Key messaging for people at risk of an overdose focuses on six overdose prevention and harm reduction tips:

1. Never use alone—if you OD while alone, you can die
2. Go slow—start with a small amount to test drug strength
3. Call 911—in case of an overdose
4. Use new syringes—to reduce risk of infections and help to protect vein health.
5. Test for fentanyl—fentanyl can be dangerous, so test with easy-to-use strips
6. Carry naloxone—Narcan® nasal spray can reverse an overdose

Messaging for family and friends also highlights steps they can take to lower a loved one’s risk of a fatal overdose, including where to find free naloxone, keeping naloxone on-hand (and knowing how to use it), and calling 911.

The campaign directs people to call or visit [VT Helplink](#) or visit knowodvt.com for more information and resources.

Community Support for Overdose Prevention

Community Action Grants have been awarded to four counties with a high burden of opioid overdoses through the CDC Overdose Data to Action Grant. Bennington, Rutland, Windham, and Windsor counties began by assessing the needs in their region and are now using this funding to identify and implement services and activities that address overdoses in their region.

Helping Vermont
communities respond
to opioid overdoses.

Community-level Rapid Overdose Response: March through August 2021, 11 Linkage to Care Enhancement Grants, totaling nearly \$300,000, were awarded to local community stakeholders to address overdose risks associated with COVID-19. Building on the success of those grants, the Department of Health is currently in negotiations for nine grants also totaling nearly \$300,000 to address Overdose Prevention and Response activities. These grants will run from April 1, 2022 through August 31, 2022.

SAMHSA COVID-19 Emergency Response Grant

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has provided a 37-month emergency grant to address the impact of COVID-19 on substance use and mental health in Vermont. The Department of Health is funding the following activities:

- Enhanced 24/7 substance use disorder emergency services in Bennington, Rutland, Windham and Windsor counties.
- Increased funding for recovery support outreach and services.
- Delivery and curbside dosing of Medications for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD).
- Increased promotion of [VT Helpline](#).

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