



Tackling the Substance Use Problem as a Community: Kentucky River Counties Unite to Create a Solution

Communities coming together to conduct a substance use disorder needs assessment and develop a strategic plan to address the identified gaps and barriers.

Resilience is the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties. Rural communities are resilient.

There is Hope!

More than 20 Eastern Kentucky counties have a higher rate of deaths related to drug overdose than the national average. The present rate is 28.8 per 100,000 Kentuckians dying due to drug, alcohol and suicide is predicted to increase to an incomprehensible 81.3 by 2025.* People living in the Appalachian Region are 55% more likely to die from a drug overdose than people in the rest of the U.S. Over the past decade, the number of Kentuckians who die from drug overdoses has steadily climbed to more than 1,000 each year, exacting a devastating toll on families, communities, social services, economic stability, and growth.

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[*https://overdosemappingtool.norc.org/](https://overdosemappingtool.norc.org/)

In response to this crisis, several of the Kentucky River Health Consortium agencies came together to identify and/or develop the tools, skills, and strategies needed to aggressively reduce the morbidity and mortality associated with substance use disorder (SUD) and opioid use disorder (OUD). This project was titled “The **Kentucky River Community United for Restoring Resilience and Empowerment**” (KyR- CURRE).

KyR-CURRE’s first step was to utilize consortium members and community partners to conduct a detailed comprehensive needs assessment to identify opportunities and gaps in prevention, treatment and recovery of substance misuse.

KyR-CURRE Partnering Agencies:
Kentucky River Community Care, Inc.
Kentucky River District Health Department
Mary Breckinridge ARH Hospital
Hazard ARH Regional Medical Center
North Fork Valley Community Health Center
UK Center of Excellence in Rural Health
Operation UNITE
Perry County Wellness Coalition
Breathitt County Health Department
Save The Children

Overview of Findings

The focus was not limited to a particular substance use disorder (SUD) population. The goal was to identify overall barriers to recovery and find ways to address these barriers. Since SUD individuals are not in isolation- there is a network of people impacted by their addiction- it must also be ensured that family and friends have the resources, knowledge and skills needed to protect themselves and their loved one with an addiction.

An online survey was utilized to capture perceptions on Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT)*, syringe exchange programs and,

Background

The Kentucky River Health Consortium has representation from hospitals, behavioral health providers, Federally Qualified Health Care Centers, clinics, managed care organizations, health departments, diabetes coalitions, youth wellness groups, cancer networks, community health workers, disabilities experts, law enforcement, university research and academic partners, public health, health care agencies and health coalitions. Since the initial Consortium meeting on December 1, 2017, the Consortium has met quarterly. The **mission** of the Consortium is to use our collective expertise and resources to address the health burdens in the Kentucky River counties.

Naloxone/Narcan. Respondents selected if they were responding as a healthcare professional, faith-based representative, employer, or community member. Based on their selection, a specific set of questions was presented relating to what they saw as trends or problems with misuse of opioids and other drugs in the community; what gaps/barriers they felt prevented individuals from seeking or receiving

treatment; and what training (a list was given) they felt would help them serve those in their community with substance use disorder. Two focus groups were also conducted; one in Breathitt County and one in Perry County. For the focus groups, items from the survey were delved into for a better understanding of responses. The table below summarizes some of the responses to a few of the questions.

Question from Survey	Summary
Top issues you feel must be addressed to improve health and quality of life in your community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Substance Use Disorder • Economy, Jobs and Income • Mental Health
Top choices that you feel would help your community to be healthier and/or improve quality of life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More opportunities for youth • More programs designed to prevent substance use • Reducing the stigma associated with mental health issues • Programs to promote stronger families
What trends or problems are you seeing in the misuse of opioids or other drugs in your community?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing use of methamphetamines • Increased homelessness • Misuse of prescriptions provided via MAT • Growing impacts on young people
What gaps do you see that prevent individuals from seeking or receiving treatment for substance use disorder?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental Health issues • Stigma • Employment

***MAT:** is the use of medications in combination with counseling and behavioral therapies, which is effective in the treatment of opioid use disorders (OUD) and can help some people to sustain recovery. **Syringe Exchange Programs:** harm reduction programs that provide sterile needles to people who inject drugs, dispose of unsterile needles, and provide an array of other services. The goal of the programs is to reduce the transmission of diseases, such as HIV and hepatitis C. **Naloxone/Narcan:** a medication called an "opioid antagonist" used to counter the effects of an opioid overdose.

Themes that Emerged

In addition to the information gathered from the survey and focus groups, data was also collected from additional sources to help us understand the extent of the problem in the region. From the information collected 5 themes emerged as need areas in the Kentucky River District.

Each need area is listed below with an explanation of why it was found to be impacting prevention, treatment, and recovery efforts in the Kentucky River District.



- **Rural Healthcare Workers with SUD Knowledge**

The stigma associated with SUD and mental health issues was identified by some as reasons healthcare providers were unwilling to treat SUD clients. Often providers have not received the needed training/education to understand the nature of addiction or to feel capable to treat clients with SUD. There is a need to increase rural healthcare workers' abilities to identify signs of substance misuse and/or mental health needs in their clients. Additionally, there is a need for workers with specific education and training in working with the SUD population.

- **Programs to Support Families and Youth Impacted by SUD**

Childcare workers and programs qualified to work with youth in out-of-home care due to substance use by a parent(s) is a need area. Many youth in out of home care are dealing with parental loss, imprisonment, and the possible death of a parent due to addiction. There is also a need for recreational and entertainment activities for youth in the Kentucky River District. Many local businesses have closed and travel is often a barrier for youth and their caregivers. Childcare for parents in recovery was another identified area of need. As parents work through treatment and recovery programs and attempt to secure employment they need affordable and accessible childcare to keep their children with them or in order to regain custody.

- **Available and Accessible Treatment Facilities**

In our area, the majority of services are provided by the comprehensive care centers. Often the stigma attached to being seen at these facilities discourage clients from seeking treatment. Additional barriers to treatment include transportation, family obligations, or other responsibilities that make seeking help unobtainable. There is a need for long-term treatment facilities within the Kentucky River district to decrease barriers for those with SUD and increase accessibility to treatment.

- **Employment for those in Recovery**

Those in recovery need to find employment. This is often a challenge due to limited jobs in the area and limited education and job skills of the individuals. Factor in the stigma associated with their past and the policies of some agencies, and it is almost impossible for those in recovery to find employment. Employers need to be educated around recovery and to establish protocols for working with those in recovery.

- **Care Coordination and Stakeholder Involvement**

There is a need for more consistent and coordinated evidenced-based programming. A host of agencies are working in the area of SUD however, they are not always communicating about efforts. Care coordination workers (CHW, peer support, case managers) with knowledge of community resources and supports are needed to help those in treatment and recovery to navigate

the system and address barriers to ensure success. Recovery focused communities are also essential to ensuring prevention, treatment, and recovery efforts are available. Individuals need to understand that addiction is a disease and only by working together can we reduce the stigma and ensure success for those seeking treatment and in recovery.

Now the Work Begins

A strategic plan was created to address what steps need to occur for the Kentucky River counties to be successful in decreasing the number of substance abuse overdoses and deaths.

The first objective is to increase affordability and accessibility to evidence-based SUD prevention, treatment, and recovery programs for those needing the service. For this to occur there needs to be a decrease in the stigma associated with MAT and ensure provided services are effective-what the SUD client needs. Naloxone will need to be more accessible within our communities, with people properly trained to administer.

The second objective is to address the workforce shortage by increasing the number of healthcare providers with education in working with the SUD population. Providers and individuals need to understand the disease of addiction and the signs and symptoms of SUD.

The third objective is to identify and implement evidence-based programming to support families and youth impacted by SUD. Family members and youth need access to trained individuals who can identify resources and support them in their journey of addiction with their loved one.

Fourth, there is a need to increased access for those in treatment and recovery to care coordination from a holistic approach. For those in treatment and recovery a referral process needs to be developed and implemented to address resource needs beyond the SUD. This will require an increase in the number of

coordinators/navigators (CHWs, Peer Support Specialist) prepared to assist in this process.

Finally, the fifth objective is to increase knowledge around the substance use disorder. Stigma in the communities around SUD will have to decrease and resources and support must increase. Individuals in the counties need to be aware of the value of prevention efforts and open to advocating for needed resources for those in treatment and recovery.

"If there's any silver lining to the Substance Use Disorder that I see, is that it is truly a problem that is so huge, that it has broken down barriers and built bridges between agencies that have realized that we can't do it all ourselves, and we have got to work together."

Scott Lockard, KRDHD Public Health Director
NACCHO interview from December 2019.

Looking Ahead- How Can You Help

- Learn more about the disease of addiction, look for online resources and training events to gain knowledge.
- Educate yourself and help reduce the stigma associated with substance use disorder by changing how we talk about those with an addiction.
- Participate in drug take-back programs- most county sheriff's offices are drop off locations.
- Engage with youth to assist in prevention efforts- be a mentor, offer recreational opportunities.
- If you own a business explore opportunities to employ those in recovery.
- Become a member of the Kentucky River Health Consortium- contact melissa.slone@uky.edu for additional information.

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