



“OFR Truly Became a Platform for Change in Our Community”: Forum Shows Overdose Fatality Review Recommendations Transforming Community Responses to Substance Use

Catching Up With COSSAP, February 2023

The [2023 National Forum on Overdose Fatality Review \(OFR\)](#) was designed to show communities nationwide how OFRs—confidential death reviews conducted by multidisciplinary teams to identify system gaps and improve overdose prevention and intervention strategies—have emerged as perhaps the most effective tool available to them in their efforts to reduce overdose deaths. To that end, turnout at the forum would serve as an effective gauge of that claim, as well as an opportunity for participants to share valuable OFR resources and best practices.

The verdict: Eight hundred and fifty-one people participated in the January 19–20 event, both virtually and in person in Arlington, Virginia, eclipsing turnout at the previous OFR Forum, [in 2021](#), by 12 percent. The tremendous response was proof positive that OFRs—and specifically the recommendations OFR teams make to communities to help prevent future overdoses—are informing effective responses to substance use by equipping jurisdictions with both evidence-based strategies and the local partnerships needed to implement them. The growing uptake of OFRs across the country was a welcome corrective to the otherwise negative trends about overdose rates that fill news feeds.



“This is an important gathering.”—Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) Director Karlton Moore opens the 2023 Forum on Overdose Fatality Review (OFR) on January 19, 2023.

What could not have been predicted was just *how* welcome the news about OFRs would be.

Speaker after speaker, in moving presentations that brought some of them—and many in the audience—to tears, described how OFRs not only have made community responses more efficient and effective but have turned into invaluable forums for helping families and other loved ones start down the road to recovery.

Sandy Shaffer, a social worker who has served on the Winnebago County, Wisconsin, OFR team since its inception in 2018, noted during an early plenary session that prior to the team’s launch, “very few people [involved in overdose responses] had been connected to the recovery community.”

“It’s crucial to say this: this is what the recovery community need and want,” Ms. Shaffer said. “We held community conversations with friends and family; people in recovery wanted to feel valued, wanted to feel heard. We were able to bridge the recovery community with the broader community, which helped to reduce stigma.”



The 2023 National Forum on Overdose Fatality Review, held January 19–20 in Arlington, Virginia, drew 851 participants, online and in person, from OFR teams across the country.

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Shawn Ellis, an addiction recovery coach who serves on the recently established OFR team in Whitley County, Indiana, described the most immediate effect of team meetings: “empathy is starting to come back.”

“We begin meetings by reviewing obituaries and talk about how [the family member] was loved by their loved ones. That helps with people who have become desensitized,” Ms. Ellis said. “And they appreciate it that the state brings the obituary, because the family sees [overdose victims] as totally different than how the state looks at them. Then we talk through the individual’s entire journey—we see all the pieces, see where the gaps are. And we see consistency in the gaps, the same stuff, over and over.”

For Dr. Jennifer Skolaski, facilitator of the Winnebago County OFR team, it is that combination of trend identification and emotional catharsis that makes OFR meetings so valuable.



Dr. Jennifer Skolaski, facilitator of the Winnebago County, Wisconsin, OFR team, said that attendance at the team’s monthly meetings was high because team members “want to see . . . change happening.”

“We have 47 partners on our OFR team, and 25 to 35 attend our monthly meetings. They come because they want to see that change happening,” Dr. Skolaski said. “Our work isn’t just the review. [But] we’ve made 47 recommendations since the OFR team began and started 11 pilot programs. We’ve made change and impact in the community: we’ve worked with the University of Wisconsin to get naloxone boxes installed across campus, created a peer-led rapid response team, and are working in jails.”

“OFR truly became a platform for change in our community,” she added.

Even before the presentations got underway, federal officials in the opening plenary session recognized that the in-person format—the forum’s first face-to-face meeting in more than 3 years—had tapped long-pent-up emotions.

Mallory O’Brien, a Senior Policy Advisor for the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), said “This work is not easy [but] real, system-level change [is] happening. How do you know that an OFR is working? The testament is here, and it shows it’s working: we can see the success. Once an OFR gets going, recommendations just start to happen, from the kernel of an idea to an action plan, and then implementation. That’s what we’re here for—recommendations and action.”



Mallory O’Brien of @DOJBJA at the 2023 OFR Forum: “We’ve come very far in a short period of time. We have representatives from rural, tribal, urban communities - we learn from you as much as we learn from each other. This is your success.”



11:52 AM · Jan 19, 2023 · 174 Views

OFR in Action: Recommendations for Change

After the federal plenary session—which also featured Grant Baldwin, Director of the Division of Overdose Prevention at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC); Shannon Kelly, Director of the National High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas (HIDTA) Program at the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP); and Dr. Yngvild Olsen, Director of the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)—a presentation

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by officials from Lackawanna County, Pennsylvania, set the stage for the rest of the forum by showing just how transformative one OFR team and its recommendations can be for local overdose responses, especially when an influential senior public official gets involved.

Carina Havenstrite, a program manager in the county’s district attorney’s office, described Lackawanna County’s journey to the launch of its OFR team in early 2020 after receiving a COSSAP grant, just as she had in the [October 2021 issue](#) of *Catching Up With COSSAP*. “It was a challenge,” she said then. “There weren’t nearly the resources then that OFR teams have now—no toolkit, no message exchange.”

Early on, Ms. Havenstrite and the OFR team were struck by the growing presence of fentanyl in Lackawanna County. As the county considered its response, a discussion during one OFR team meeting yielded a proposal to decriminalize fentanyl test strips, which can detect the presence of fentanyl in unregulated drugs. Ms. Havenstrite was able to convince her boss, Lackawanna County District Attorney Mark Powell, to become an early and consistent champion of the idea.



Mark Powell, district attorney for Lackawanna County, Pennsylvania, called for decriminalization of fentanyl test strips at a 2021 press conference, based on a recommendation from the county’s OFR team. His support prompted a campaign that resulted in a new decriminalization law in January 2023.

Mr. Powell called a press conference in September 2021 to bring attention to the fentanyl problem and the decriminalization proposal. Initially, there was little response. Then, in a domino effect, fellow district attorneys across Pennsylvania began holding their own press conferences—so pervasive was the fentanyl trend, Mr. Powell said.

In short order, Pennsylvania’s District Attorneys Association “got on board” with the decriminalization proposal, Mr. Powell said. Fast forward to January 2023: a new law decriminalizing test strips in Pennsylvania just took effect, thanks in large part to the strong prosecutorial support behind it.

“We were able to overcome stigma within law enforcement,” Mr. Powell said. “We met with police chiefs, and training was key. And partnership is key to an OFR team; that’s how you break down silos to accomplish goals. [Ultimately,] if you save one life, it’s all worth it.”

“I immersed myself in the recovery community, and I’ve been learning ever since,” he added. “And we have a robust recovery community in Lackawanna County—we just had to get folks at the [OFR] table.”

Since the inception of the OFR team 3 years ago, Lackawanna County’s overdose response has moved from strength to strength: in support of a targeted naloxone distribution effort, a collaboration with the county’s Office of Drug and Alcohol Programs has resulted in the provision of naloxone in all county schools (at the request of school nurses) and more than 700 recovery kits across the county.

OFR: A Template for Better Community Responses

Lackawanna County’s presentation established a template that each of the OFR teams serving as panelists for the forum’s subsequent concurrent sessions (outlined in the [agenda](#)) followed: they described how OFR meetings had emerged as crucibles of partnership among formerly siloed stakeholders in their jurisdictions, which in turn enabled team members to identify gaps and opportunities for improvement they otherwise would have missed.

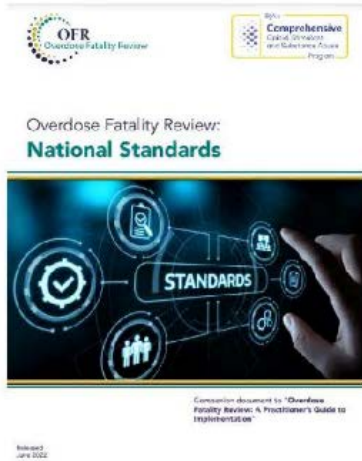
BJA leaders and other moderators then leveraged sites’ accounts and the discussions that followed to point forum attendees to the many resources housed on the Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Abuse Program (COSSAP) Resource Center’s OFR web page, which were created to improve OFR teams’ performance and enhance their access to helpful data and even more recommendations.

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Chief among those resources are the following:

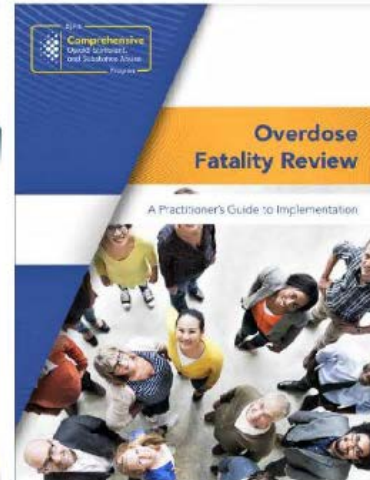
Overdose Fatality Review National Standards



Overdose Fatality Review Data System



Overdose Fatality Review Practitioner's Guide to Implementation



Another resource, promoted by CDC senior health scientist Dr. Alice Asher, was the [National Harm Reduction Technical Assistance Center](#), a collaborative effort of the CDC and SAMHSA to provide free help to anyone offering harm reduction services to their community, including syringe services programs and programs offering treatment for substance use disorder, as well as prevention and recovery programs. “There is an increasing role for harm reduction in overdose prevention,” Dr. Asher said. “What can we offer to help people stay alive? That’s what we want, really more than anything. [It could be] fentanyl test strips, naloxone distribution, drug testing for other drugs, [helping] people transitioning to other modes of consumption, or use of peer specialists.”

Other panel discussions addressed commonalities and differences in establishing OFRs in urban and rural communities; use of the [Overdose Detection Mapping Application Program](#) and other data sources to support OFR teams’ work; leveraging public health and public safety partnerships; substance misuse interventions in emergency departments; and tribal communities’ responses to overdoses. Recordings of all forum sessions are available on the [forum web page](#) on the COSSAP Resource Center website.

Across all forum discussions, the OFR team recommendations kept coming: combined with the communitywide hope they inspired, they recurred as a signature of the meeting:

“Use TA [technical assistance] partners to see other paths. Case selection methodology is also important: be very intentional about choosing cases. And don’t be afraid to ask for help. It’s important to never lose that perseverance.”

—Lindsay Wilson, Project Director
Oneida County, New York, Health Department

“Don’t be wishy-washy with your partners; be confident of that ask. They’re coming to that meeting as a collaborative partner. You’re doing something amazing for their community, so don’t be afraid to ask.”

—Shawn Ellis, Addiction Recovery Coach
Whitley County, Indiana

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“Now we have EMS peer support rural response teams—the first in rural Wisconsin. If an individual is seen for anything substance-related, they receive a follow-up [visit] from the response team, which is composed of an EMS technician and [a] peer recovery specialist. This is a program that can turn lives around.”

—Sara Jesse, Community Health Strategist
Sauk County, Wisconsin, Public Health

“Hope is one of my favorite words; it is defined as “a feeling of expectation and a desire for a certain thing to happen. . . . Now we have hope in Michigan: six counties out of 83 in Michigan have OFR teams.”

—Kim Pickett, Project Specialist
Center for Child and Family Health
Michigan Public Health Institute



Taken together, panelists’ testimonies described an empowering step in the evolution of OFRs as a centerpiece of community responses—perhaps best captured by the new [We ❤️ You](#) app recently launched by the Winnebago County OFR Team.

“It means we hear you, we love you, and we stand together as a community to help one another in times of need,” the app reads.

COSSAP @COSSAPcommunity · Jan 19
Michelle White of @DOJBJA at the 2023 OFR Forum: “People in rural communities are innovative, resilient, and resourceful. Many of you are amazing examples of that innovation, resilience, and resourcefulness. BJA is committed to supporting the innovative work you do.”



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Scenes From the 2023 National Forum on Overdose Fatality Review

