After an initial spike soon after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown in Kentucky, statewide opioid overdoses have been trending downward consistently and are nearly back to pre-pandemic levels. This trend should be interpreted with care since the syndromic (SyS) data feed lacked full statewide coverage. Additionally, conditions at the local level may be masked in the state-level data aggregation.

Even with the return to pre-pandemic levels, the average daily count of opioid overdoses in 2020 is still higher than in previous years.

Reports on trends at the community level are available, subject to data suppression for small counts, by making a request to kiprc_data_request@l.uky.edu.

To learn more about drug overdose deaths in 2020, check out the Kentucky Data 2 Action Community Summit described in the Upcoming Events section of this newsletter.
A s states continue to grapple with drug overdoses, communities are turning to creative initiatives to curb substance use.

With help from an Overdose Data to Action mini-grant from the Kentucky Injury Prevention and Research Center, the Franklin County Health Department (FCHD) recently launched the Just Say Yes initiative, inspired by the Icelandic Prevention Model (IPM) that looks for effective programs to prevent substance misuse.

“The evidence base behind the Icelandic Prevention Model was the strongest we’d seen, and the focus on healthy activities for youth really resonated in our community, where there has long been a concern about inadequate opportunity for kids,” said Amelia Berry, Just Say Yes Coordinator for the FCHD.

The goal of the initiative is to keep kids engaged in healthy activities when school is out to prevent substance use and other risky behaviors, which tend to take hold during adolescents’ unsupervised time.

FCHD and its partners created the “Yes Card,” a $400 electronic debit card that can be used to pay for after-school and other out-of-school activities from a list of approved program providers. The Yes Card can be used at a variety of locations, including Kentucky Dance Academy, Yes Arts, Josephine Sculpture Park, Broadway Clay, Kentucky Gem Cats, My Old Kentucky Om Yoga Studio, Canoe Kentucky, Frankfort Martial Arts, and New Day Ministries, an equine-based life skills program.

A pilot group of 300 students will receive three Yes Cards over the next two and a half years.

“Despite obvious barriers posed by COVID, the launch has been very successful,” Berry said. “The response has been extremely positive, especially from parents and guardians, who overwhelmingly report that the Yes Cards have allowed their children to access programs that would’ve otherwise been out of reach financially.”

According to the FCHD, all providers attend an orientation that includes training in the Icelandic Prevention Model. Six hours of training are required each year, including training in youth development, trauma-informed practices, mental health first aid, and equity, diversity, and inclusion. Providers also must submit background check information for anyone who will be working with youth and sign a contract agreeing to attend trainings, maintain proper insurance coverage, and follow applicable laws, policies, and best practices, including COVID protocols.

The Just Say Yes initiative also adapted Iceland’s youth survey for all 7th- through 10th-grade public school students in Franklin County. The survey, administered annually or biannually, assesses key risk and protective factors as drivers of substance use. The survey has been updated to include questions about the impact of the pandemic, and Just Say Yes partners added questions aimed at understanding the impact of political unrest and racial injustice on students’ mental health.

The 74-question survey is anonymous and includes detailed questions about a wide range of risk and protective factors (“How many hours do you sleep on an average night?” “In the last seven days, how often did you go out and return after midnight?”, and “In the last 30 days, how many days were you absent from school?”), as well as questions about substance use, mental health, and delinquency indicators. Nearly 1,700 Franklin County students—71% percent of all public school 7th through 10th graders—filled out the survey in December. Berry expects to receive the data from the survey in February.

OD2A grant funding covers the cost of training, technical assistance, and data analysis provided through a contract with the Icelandic Center for Social Research and Analysis (ICSRA, aka “Planet Youth”), whose researchers assist communities around the world that are implementing the IPM. ICSRA will analyze the data and present key findings and recommendations to the coalition and community stakeholders, who will use the information to identify additional prevention interventions to decrease risk factors and increase protective factors. Surveys will be repeated annually to track substance use rates, detect changing trends in risk/protective factors driving use, and adjust interventions as needed. The program also receives support from the Foundation for a Healthy Kentucky.

“COVID has been a crash course in the public health impact of coordinated community planning and
While many barriers exist for accessing substance use disorder (SUD) treatment, the difficulty of finding a treatment facility that has openings and is accepting patients is one of the most significant. As a way to reduce this barrier, the Kentucky Injury Prevention and Research Center (KIPRC) created FindHelpNowKY.org, a near-real-time SUD treatment locator that has nearly real time information on available treatment openings for Kentucky facilities.

To build on the success of FindHelpNowKY.org, KIPRC is utilizing funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Overdose Data to Action grant to expand the treatment locator nationally. KIPRC staff are working with states or municipal jurisdictions to implement the national platform FindHelpNow.org for their citizens. Since the national launch of FindHelpNow.org in March 2020, Tennessee, three counties in Ohio, and two counties in California have decided to implement the FindHelpNow.org website platform.

The first adopter of FindHelpNow.org, the state of Tennessee, is creating its jurisdiction-specific landing page, developing marketing materials, and reaching out to the state’s SUD treatment facilities to enroll and develop their facility database.

A pilot test for the entire state of Ohio, Erie, Licking, and Clark counties initiated plans for platform adoption in September 2020. Testing began in January 2021. KIPRC is working with its software development company, APAX, to develop a way to combine three counties into one jurisdiction.

Placer and Nevada counties, California, signed an MOU and began customizing its page and database in January of 2021. Early on, KIPRC worked with these counties to share strategies on creating partnerships and onboarding facilities to help get their website off the ground.

Currently, seven other jurisdictions are considering adopting the FindHelpNow.org platform.

Under Kentucky’s OD2A program, KIPRC will provide technical assistance to any jurisdiction developing its own SUD treatment locator website. For example, Lake County, California, was tasked with creating an SUD treatment facility locator and website. As an alternative to adopting the FindHelpNow.org platform, Lake County requested technical assistance to help design and implement its own SUD treatment facility locator website. The KyOD2A team provided resources regarding the creation of an SUD treatment facility list as well as information on SUD treatment facility engagement and onboarding. The resultant Lake County website is located at www.recoverynowLC.com.
Despite interruptions from an ongoing pandemic, the Kentucky Department for Public Health and Kentucky Pharmacists Association’s Mobile Harm Reduction Unit has been able to partner with local health departments to distribute naloxone kits and educational handouts during COVID-19 testing events.

Jody Jaggers, Director of Pharmacy Public Health Programs for the Kentucky Pharmacy Education and Research Foundation, said the mobile unit’s mission is to travel to mobile, or remote, events to make it easier for people to access naloxone. However, plans for the mobile unit were disrupted by the pandemic, which forced the team to get creative.

“We realized that several health departments are offering drive-through COVID-19 testing events and thought perhaps that might be an opportunity for us to partner with them to provide naloxone education and distribution to interested individuals that were already coming to be tested,” Jaggers said.

The Mobile Harm Reduction Unit partnered with the Franklin County Health Department (FCHD) to pilot the program.

Sally Brunner, a nurse administrator with the FCHD, said the first event—a community event held July 22 at Dolly Graham Park—came together quickly but proved to be an efficient and productive endeavor, according to Brunner.

“Providing multiple services with a ‘one-stop-shop’ concept was a success,” Brunner said. “FCHD has performed other multiple service events and has learned that creating ‘easy access’ to health care and education is key. Partnering with the [Mobile Harm Reduction] Unit proved beneficial to our clients and to the community in a unique way.”

From July to November, the Mobile Harm Reduction Unit was deployed for nine events in seven counties and dispensed 408 two-dose units of Narcan.

Jaggers said the response so far has been positive.

“The overwhelming majority of people getting tested for COVID-19 has also received naloxone education or free doses of Narcan to take home,” he said. “Many have shared stories of loved ones or friends/neighbors that have substance use struggles.”

The Mobile Harm Reduction Unit paired up with events ranging from stand-alone naloxone training to opioid overdose awareness walks and COVID-19 and HIV/HCV testing. When possible, teams of two or more Harm Reduction Unit personnel engaged in street-level outreach at sites remote from the main event.

When events were suspended due to surging COVID-19 cases and the onset of less predictable weather, the team worked on developing a process to provide virtual events that are county-specific.

“We are not attempting to participate in flu vaccine events at the moment, though we might be able to tie in with COVID-19 vaccination events in the future,” he added.

Jaggers said the best way for people to find out about events is to follow their local health department on social media.

The Mobile Harm Reduction Unit is a partnership between the Kentucky Department for Public Health, the Cabinet for Health and Family Services (via the Kentucky Opioid Response Effort grant), the Kentucky Injury Prevention Research Center (via the Opioid Data to Action grant), and the Kentucky Pharmacists Association/Kentucky Pharmacy Education and Research Foundation.
The individual and social impacts of the drug overdose epidemic have left many communities searching for effective ways to reduce substance misuse and drug overdoses. The complex nature of the problem requires widely accepted and evaluated intervention strategies for community leaders, public health officials, and health care providers.

This complex problem requires a multifaceted approach, especially at the community level. Multiple strategies and programs are required to target varying age groups—from teens and young adults through working-aged adults to seniors—and individuals with widely varying education and income levels. KIPRC created The Drug Overdose Prevention Tackle Box: A Guide for Communities to help Kentucky’s communities, especially rural and small-town Kentucky.

According to Drug Overdose Community Interventions Program Manager Genia McKee, the Tackle Box is for individuals and agencies that make up the whole community. She said it’s not written with only health departments in mind.

“It is to assist local communities, stakeholders, new coalition members—anyone interested in coalition building and community-based overdose prevention,” McKee said. “It’s a good, free resource for people new to coalition building and a nice refresher for those who have been doing coalition work for a while.”

The Drug Overdose Prevention Tackle Box contains two sections. The
first outlines how to design an overdose prevention strategy best-suited for a particularly community. McKee said most communities already have programs. With that in mind, one aim of the Tackle Box is to encourage communities to leverage the work, energy, and resources of a community and to not duplicate work.

“Part I is useful for all kinds of community-based and coalition work, not only harm reduction and drug overdose prevention. Its chapters are also designed to stand alone, to be read when needed,” she said.

Part II is a listing and vetting of more than 40 evidence-based, evidence-informed, and promising practices. McKee said the list is not complete nor is it designed to be, but it is a starting point.

“Our intent in Part II was to start a listing of programs that are easy to sort through and compare and are compatible with most Kentucky communities and, if possible, to address program cost, program evidence base, and pros and cons of each,” she said.

McKee added she would like citizens and professionals to send other programs that they think might be good to add to Part II. She said the plan is to update Part II as new information and programs become available. Program suggestions can be sent to genia.mckee@uky.edu.

To view the Tackle Box, visit https://kiprc.uky.edu/programs/drug-overdose-community-interventions and click on the Explore link.

UPCOMING EVENTS

**Kentucky Data 2 Action Community Summit**, April 29, 2021, 1:30–2:00 PM
Join data analysts from KIPRC for a virtual discussion of trends and patterns in drug overdose deaths that occurred in 2020, with a special emphasis on the types of drugs involved in these deaths and the age groups that experienced the greatest increase in deaths. To register, visit https://uky.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_0T-8PpDzQUCY4vb2UxHXBw. Contact Meghan Steel at meghansteel@uky.edu.

The **Local Lens** is a new podcast created and presented by the Powell County (Kentucky) Health Department and Powell County CARES. Each week, host Nate Brooks and special guests talk about different aspects of Powell County’s experience with the drug epidemic. To listen to episodes, visit https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCYvQAsq61LjLmTqpa4QOoWw.

NEW REPORTS


