Understanding Overdose Fatality Review Teams

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PEER 2 PEER: Information for Peer Support Specialists, Care Navigators, and Others Dedicated to Supporting Recovery

The Big Picture

- Overdose fatality review teams bring together representatives from community agencies and organizations who work collaboratively to identify factors that contribute to drug overdoses, improve outcomes, and positively impact the lives of those affected by overdose.
- The purpose of an overdose fatality review team is to review fatal overdoses, identify gaps in services and points where prevention or intervention services might have made a difference, and develop plans to improve services and reduce fatal overdoses.

Overdose fatality review (OFR) has become an important strategy for reducing overdose-related fatalities. OFR programs are still uncommon in Kentucky, but some communities in the Commonwealth have developed OFR teams in recent years.

The OFR process involves the review of overdose fatality data, and particularly case information for specific fatal overdoses, by a multidisciplinary team. The goal of this process is to identify gaps in the support system for people who have died from an overdose and to develop innovative overdose prevention and intervention strategies that meet the specific needs of the community. By combining information from community sources with details about a specific overdose death, including a timeline of the decedent's history, interactions with community agencies and organizations, and the circumstances surrounding the overdose, the team can better understand the factors that contributed to the fatal overdose. They may also be able to identify missed opportunities that might have prevented an overdose death.

Over time, reviewing overdose fatality cases helps OFR team members identify common patterns, unmet needs, service gaps, and opportunities for improvement in the community. These insights can guide recommendations for changes that better address community needs and strengthen existing resources and services.

Developing an OFR Team

An effective OFR team includes people from different community organizations who actively work together to prevent overdose deaths. Core members of an OFR team represent:

- Public health
- Health care organizations
- Behavioral health providers
- Law enforcement
- Criminal justice agencies such as courts, jails, and probation
- EMS and other first responders
- The Department for Community Based Services
- Medical examiner or coroner's office
- Schools

In some cases, including representatives from community services organizations (e.g., housing agencies, food banks, and other support organizations) may be appropriate.

Written guidelines and agreements govern the operation of an OFR team. Many partners—such as health care providers, who are bound by HIPAA requirements—may insist on having formal, legal data-sharing and confidentiality agreements in place to share information with other team members. This is particularly important because, unlike some other states, Kentucky does not have a law that specifically protects the confidentiality of information used in an overdose review by an OFR team.

The local coroner's office is a key partner for Kentucky OFR teams. Kentucky coroners have

broad legal authority to investigate sudden, unexpected, or suspicious deaths. This authority allows them to obtain many records, including medical or toxicology records, that might not otherwise be available to an OFR team. By including the OFR team as a source of professional expertise when investigating suspected overdose fatalities, the coroner's office can improve its investigations while also supporting the work of the OFR team. As with any other partner, a legal information sharing and confidentiality agreement should define the roles and responsibilities of the coroner's office and the OFR team.

The Review Process

The review process generally begins with an examination of community data to identify substance use and overdose trends, including any recent changes in overdose patterns. Team members then select cases for review using established criteria that reflect the team's goals and available resources, such as jurisdiction, substances involved, cause of death, and the status of any ongoing investigations. Additional factors, such as geographic areas, populations experiencing increased overdose deaths, emerging substance trends, or the decedent's prior interactions with the criminal justice system, EMS, health-care, SUD treatment, or other service or support system, may be used to narrow the selection to a manageable number of cases and ensure reviews generate meaningful prevention recommendations.

After cases have been selected, the team reviews each one in detail. These reviews, which are highly confidential, attempt to determine both the facts (what happened) and the circumstances surrounding each case, with a focus on identifying systemic gaps, missed opportunities to provide prevention and intervention services, and new or evolving risks associated with substance use (e.g., the appearance of a new or altered substance in the community). The goal is to use the information learned from case reviews to improve and expand prevention and intervention strategies in the community and to identify and resolve any gaps or weaknesses in services identified by the team.

Sustaining an OFR Team

To remain organized and effective, an OFR team needs a coordinator. The team coordinator gathers community substance use and overdose information, identifies potential cases to be considered for review, works with the team members to select meeting dates and locations, and provides copies of information and records to team members before a review session. The coordinator is often responsible for taking minutes during case reviews and tracking OFR recommendations, including monitoring progress and documenting updates.

Most members of OFR teams serve as part of their job responsibilities for their agency or organization but have other duties that occupy most of their workday. A few may be unpaid volunteers who represent other community organizations. Identifying a team member with the time and skills needed to serve as the OFR coordinator can be challenging. Some partner organizations may choose to assign a paid staff member to this role. While securing funding to support the coordinator's time can be difficult, resources such as opioid settlement funds and eligible grant programs may help support the position.

For more information, check out:

- www.ofrtools.org,
- www.coalitionrx.org/overdose-fatality-review-team/what-is-an-ofr-team.html,
- www.legislativeanalysis.org/overdose-fatality review-teams-summary-of-state-lawse-laws

Please use the QR code to access a brief follow-up survey regarding this report; thank you in advance for helping us to improve our services.

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