

County partnership forges ahead with plan to help drug addicts

BY SHAR PORIER

shar.porier@myheraldreview.com

BISBEE — In an effort to track lives lost to drugs and what could be done to prevent fatal overdoses, the 2022 Cochise County Overdose Fatality report (OFR) presents the efforts of a number of agencies who worked together to understand the dangers of abuse of legal and illegal drugs.

National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA) explains the issues in drug addiction and calls it a “complex disease” that changes the brain in ways that make quitting hard. It is considered a “relapsing” disease” and it’s why people in recovery have such a hard time stopping drug use, even after years of sobriety. And, if a person falters and returns to abusing drugs, there is more danger to them as they think they can return to the amounts they used to take. It can lead to an overdose. Addiction is a disease that hits at every economic level.

In today’s world where fentanyl can be easily and cheaply produced and added to other opioids, methamphet-

amine and cocaine, it creates a greater chance of death.

In 2021, a consortium of public health professionals began to set upon the problem and the OFR began to review the overdose deaths to see how those who become addicts can be helped.

The report was the result of the partnership between Cochise Health and Social Services (CHSS), Arizona Department of Health Services (AZDHS), the county Detention Center, county legal defenders office, Copper Queen Community Hospital, Chiricahua Community Health Clinics, Inc., Cochise Harm Reduction, Douglas Police Department and the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner.

The group reviewed information of drug deaths to see what services could be offered to prevent overdosing and suicide.

OFR discussed what possible changes could have been made in these lives and what points of contact, connection, systems changes, or education could have prevented these deaths?



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Dennis Walto, chief external affairs officer and executive director with the Chiricahua Community Health Center and Cochise County Health and Social Services Director Barbara Lang talks while attending this week's ACF function in Sierra Vista.

In Arizona, AZDHS tracks opioid-specific fatal and non-fatal overdoses. In Phoenix alone, an estimated 991 people died from drug overdoses in 2022. In 2023, Maricopa County’s estimated overdose deaths from drugs was 42 people per 100,000.

In Cochise County, there were 46 deaths from overdoses, but 38 were considered accidental and six were suicides. Two cases were undetermined due to lack of records. It took public records requests to get all the information they needed to investigate these cases of addiction.

Methamphetamine topped the county list as the cause of death with fentanyl in a close second. Methamphetamine, taken alone or combined with fentanyl, contributes to the overdose crisis in the United States, according to the NIDA.

Fentanyl is a pain killer similar to morphine. And it doesn’t take much to put a person in danger of overdosing. It is often mixed with methamphetamine, cocaine or heroin or other pill type illegal drugs. It is a powerful synthetic drug that is 50 to 100 times more potent. It is especially dangerous as people are unaware that fentanyl has been added. Fentanyl test strips are important so those who purchase street drugs can see if it is present.

County overdose statistics

In Cochise County, males had more deaths— 32 were males and six were females—and most were Caucasian, though Hispanics sit at No. 2. Dropouts represented 31% of those deaths and 28.95% were people with a high school diploma or GED.

Fatalities recorded showed the 55 to 64 age group had the most fatalities followed by the 45 to 54 age group.

When asked why the 55 to 64 age group led the county statistics, Cochise Health and Social Services (CHSS) director Barbara Lang said, “Any answer

would be supposition.”

Of the 38 fatalities examined in the analysis, more than 75% were due exclusively to illicit drugs — methamphetamine, cocaine, and fentanyl. One was due exclusively to an over the counter medication, and the remaining seven were due to a combination of illicit, over the counter and prescription medication.

Underlying health issues, such as heart disease, alcohol abuse, lung cancer and obesity, only increased the chances of death when illegal or prescribed drugs were abused.

The report noted, “57.89% of all reviewed overdose fatalities during 2022 had multiple, chronic physical and mental health conditions contributed to each decedent’s healthcare utilization and behavioral/mental health treatment history.”

Cochise Harm Reduction executive director Lu Funk said a few of their clients passed away that year, but importantly there were people who were able to be saved through the naloxone distribution.

CHR provides food, clothing, camping supplies and a nonjudgmental hand up. Naloxone and clean needles are also provided to those that need them.

She noted emergency services were involved in a number of these reversals, “but most of these reversals actually happen by friends who are in the vicinity of the person using substances or even using substances with that individual.”

CHR hands this medication out for free to all their participants, she continued. “In 2024, we distributed over 13,000 doses of naloxone and educated all of our participants on how to administer the medication and respond to the overdose.”

Since CHR was founded, they have had over 300 reports of overdose reversals in which they used CHR naloxone



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to reverse the overdose.

In 2024, Funk and staff took a point in time survey of their participants in 2024 and found that 77% of participants had witnessed an overdose, 24% of participants had administered naloxone and 13% had personally experienced an overdose and survived in the past 12 months.

"It's important to understand that most overdoses do not end in fatality. It's also important to note that the No.1 recommendation that came out of the OFR was an increase in harm reduction services and accessible naloxone for our community," they noted.

The drug naloxone can be administered by hospital staff, emergency personnel or law enforcement or friends and family members to counteract the effects of an overdose. It may take more than one dose depending on the amount of the drug taken and its potency.

CHR serves unhoused people throughout the county, many of whom are addicted. The agency also provides test strips to check for fentanyl in illegal drugs. The nonprofit passes them out with naloxone. Another way to prevent disease is through needle exchange where new needles are available to clients.

So, how can overdoses be prevented? Lang stated, "We need to increase education about naloxone and harm reduction."

Harm reduction is a set of practical strategies and ideas to reduce the negative consequences associated with drug use.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration states, "It is critical to engage with people who use drugs and equip them with life-saving tools and information to create positive change in their lives and potentially save their lives. Harm reduction is a key pillar in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services."

Improving substance abuse treatments are key, including Medication Assisted Treatment, providing support and education for family members and loved ones, and increasing education

and awareness of comorbid conditions, noted Lang.

Comorbid conditions are health issues other than addiction, like diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease and depression and they make a complicated and multi-faceted health problem.

While not necessarily a medical issue, those who live on the streets are at a disadvantage. "Permanent stable housing is linked to improved health outcomes," added Lang.

The partnership would like to implement and expand programs to offer affordable, stable housing for individuals at risk of substance abuse, the report stated. Providing vocational training, placement services and career counseling will help people in their recovery from substance abuse.

Programs could be developed to employ people in recovery, providing both income and a supportive work environment. Programs could be created that bundle job placement, housing and health services into a single support system for at-risk individuals.

Peer support networks for individuals in recovery need to be developed so they can share experiences and support others who seek help.

Support groups for family members and friends of individuals struggling with substance abuse to provide understanding and resources need to be created.

A better protocol for health care and behavioral health providers so they can discuss substance abuse issues and provide family education needs to be formulated.

They want to stay on top of patients who drop out of services and not rely on phone calls which are ineffective in maintaining contact.

Improving access to primary health care, mental/behavioral healthcare and peer support services is an important goal.

There is a stigma relating to those who need to seek mental health services and that needs to be resolved, Lang said. "Addiction is a disease, not a moral failing. People suffering from substance use disorders have trouble

COUNTY STATISTICS FOR OVERDOSE AND SUICIDE

- 84% increase in overdose fatalities from 2018 to 2022.
- Approximately 70% of decedents are male and outnumber female overdoses for 2022.
- The largest increase in overdose prevalence occurred in the 60–69 age group.
- Methamphetamine remains the most common cause of overdose deaths in 2022.
- Fentanyl is second most common cause of overdose fatalities in 2022.
- Mixed drug overdose was more common in 2022 than single drug overdoses.
- More than five people die every day from opioid overdoses in Arizona.

Statewide

- 3,944 nonfatal opioid overdose
- 1,291 confirmed opioid deaths
- 7,777 emergency and inpatient visits involving suspected opioids

THE COUNTY'S PROGRESS TO COMBAT OVERDOSES

- Through a partnership with University of Arizona Center for Rural Health to create an overdose recognition and response videos in English and Spanish to expand education to a wider audience.
- Hired a community health worker (CHW) to provide transportation and support to individuals with a history of substance misuse, discharged from the Cochise County jail.
- Continues to widely promote overdose prevention resources and provide naloxone to local organizations and community members.
- Maintains relationships with schools, churches, shelters, harm reduction coalitions, behavioral health organizations and local businesses to create additional naloxone access points.
- Collaboration with the Cochise County jail will continue to ensure that anyone at risk for substance misuse receives a naloxone kit upon release, in addition to overdose recognition/Narcan administration training and support resources.
- The Good Samaritan Law is a part of all community presentations. Good Samaritan laws protect people who help others in emergency situations without fear of legal consequences.
- Programs are being developed that offer family counseling and support to address housing instability and employment challenges.

controlling their drug use, even though they know drugs are harmful.

"So we should really try and show compassion and offer our support. One way to help is by letting people who use drugs know that they are not alone in their journey to overcome addiction. It can feel isolating and lonely at times, but asking for help can be the first step in that journey."

For more information on the report, visit the website at: <https://www.cochise.az.gov/documentcenter/view/19911> or call CHSS at: (520) 432-9400

