THE OPIOID CRISIS: VENTURA COUNTY RESPONDS

REDUCING SUPPLY

SAVING LIVES

REDUCING DEMAND

A Report of the Ventura County Rx Abuse & Heroin Workgroup

SPRING 2018
Nearly half of young people who abuse heroin reported misusing Rx opioids before starting heroin.

People who are addicted to Rx opioids are 40 times more likely to become addicted to heroin.
REDUCING SUPPLY

+ REDUCING DEMAND

= SAVING LIVES

Addressing the Twofold Epidemic
of Rx Painkiller and Heroin Abuse

The Ventura County Rx Abuse & Heroin Workgroup was developed in early 2012 in response to the escalating opioid epidemic, part of a nationwide crisis that crosses boundaries and demographics. Opioids have been the most widely-prescribed painkillers for many years, while heroin is an illegal street opioid that is lower cost for a comparable high. Both are extremely addictive, driving the transition for many prescription opioid abusers to the cheaper, more readily available heroin.

Ventura County’s opioid abuse response can be meaningfully focused through a supply-and-demand model first suggested by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and tailored for our local conditions and needs. Reducing the supply of opioids while also decreasing the demand for them, will lead to a greater possibility of improving and saving lives.

In this report, we highlight and share identified strategies and opportunities to reverse the trends which have led to this epidemic. We invite you to join us in connecting and enhancing resources to prevent and reduce prescription drug and heroin abuse. Together we can reduce opioid supply, reduce opioid demand, and save lives.
Prescribers may underestimate the risks of opioid addiction while overestimating painkiller benefits. The Ventura County Rx Abuse & Heroin Workgroup offers prescribers, hospitals and clinics up-to-date information and training for safe prescribing and on-site patient education.

Safe prescriber education addresses the opioid epidemic by training prescribers to respond before opioids are prescribed.

**WHEN OPIOIDS ARE USED, START LOW AND GO SLOW:**

- **Assess** pain and function
- **Consider** if non-opioid therapies are appropriate
- **Talk** to patients about treatment plan
- **Evaluate** risk of harm of misuses
- **Identify** drug misuse/addiction
- **Query** CURES 2.0 to confirm patient information
“With a 10-day supply of opioids, 1 in 5 people become long term users.”
– Andrew Kolodny, MD, Physicians for Responsible Opioid Prescribing

Prescriber Training

Informational Mailings

Over 2500 Ventura County prescribers and dispensers of medication received multiple educational Rx RISK mailings and e-blasts to update them on best practices for prescribing opioids and to share CURES 2.0 registration tips.

Rx RISK Prescribers Portal

Expanded resources for prescribers, staff and patients about the problems and prevention of prescription drug abuse.

Almost 500 viewers sought information at the online Rx RISK portal and accessed information for their patients and practices.

Risk of Continued Opioid Use Increases at 4–5 Days

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Hospitals unite on new pain medication policy for emergency departments. L. to R.: Dr. Julia Feig, Dr. Celia Woods, Dr. Neil Canby, Dr. Carlo Reyes, Dr. Anthony H. Ho, Dr. Thomas Duncan and Dr. Martin Ehrlich at Los Robles Hospital, Thousand Oaks, CA
Local prescribers are registering and utilizing the CURES 2.0 (Controlled Substance Utilization Review and Evaluation System) at increasing rates. The interactive CURES database provides the highest level of prescription drug monitoring available. It discourages “doctor shopping,” reduces overprescribing, contains information on the prescribing and dispensing of controlled substances, including opioids, and protects patients who require painkiller medication.

Our objective is to encourage and facilitate CURES registration and utilization with local education, on-site training, and promotion.

The Ventura County Rx Abuse & Heroin Workgroup worked with local hospitals and medical groups on a focused registration campaign and saw CURES 2.0 registration increase from 15% to over 70% (2013–2017).
“Prescription Drug Monitoring Programs (PDMPs) continue to be among the most promising state-level interventions to improve opioid prescribing, inform clinical practice, and protect patients at risk.”

– CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL & PREVENTION, 2016

FEATURED PARTNER
Ventura County Interagency Pharmaceutical Crimes Unit (PCU)

The Ventura County PCU, with members including the Ventura County Sheriff’s Office, Simi Valley Police Department, Thousand Oaks Police Department, Ventura Police Department, and CA Highway Patrol, is on track to meet its goal of developing innovative approaches to dealing with the opioid epidemic.

The PCU’s primary mission is combating transfer of legal prescription medication to the illegal market. In addition, they work to identify and prevent new trends of abuse among youth and investigates overdose deaths due to both prescription medication and illicit drug use.

Goal: 100% CURES utilization. Every patient, every time an opioid is prescribed.
Measuring What Matters

The Ventura County Rx Abuse & Heroin Workgroup began tracking and analyzing prescription opioid and heroin data at its inception in 2012. In 2014, local Trend Data at a Glance 2008–2014 was first published, presenting relevant indicators that established the baselines for measuring and responding to the multifaceted opioid crisis.

The workgroup remains committed to supporting ongoing data analysis to guide and evaluate collaborative actions addressing Rx and heroin abuse. Special local research has included youth treatment program participants, the jail inmate population, drug-impaired driving statistics, and analysis of overdose deaths.

Prescription drugs account for most overdose deaths (63%), far above other substance categories:

- 25% alcohol-related
- 24% heroin-related
- 18% illicit-drug related

BEST PRACTICE
“Unless we know where we stand, we’re not going to be able to continuously improve.”
– Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Rx Drug Abuse & Heroin Summit, Atlanta, 2016
Overdose Deaths in Ventura County – Key Findings

To increase the Ventura County Rx & Heroin Workgroup’s understanding of fatal overdoses, research specialist Kayleigh Hunnicutt, MA, MEd, examined countywide data provided by the Ventura County Medical Examiner Office. Following are a few select findings from the in-depth study, Ventura County Overdose Deaths 2008-2014. This report has become an important part of a broader discussion of prevention and interventions within our region.

1. **Prescription drugs account for most overdose deaths (63%)**, far above other substance categories (25% alcohol-related, 24% heroin-related, and 18% illicit drug-related).

2. **The majority of overdose deaths were opioid-related**, either heroin or opioid Rx drugs.

3. **Most of the overdose deaths were due to the use of multiple substances.** 68% consumed two or more different substances. Only 32% of overdose deaths were related to an overdose of one single substance.

4. **Overdose deaths were primarily accidental** (76% to 86% during 2008–2014) compared with 14% to 24% intentional or suicidal overdose.

5. **The patterns of overdose deaths vary by county geographic region**, calling for further jurisdictional analysis and recommendations.

*See more at www.venturacountyresponds.org.*
The countywide report of the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) indicates a hopeful decline in Lifetime Misuse of Rx drugs. However, prevention of Rx drug and heroin abuse continues to be a challenge for Ventura County youth and their families, and a focal point of the workgroup.

**CHKS ASKS:** During your life, how many times have you used Rx painkillers, tranquilizers or sedatives to get “high” for reasons other than medical?

![Bar chart showing the percentage of students using Rx drugs from 2008 to 2016 for 9th and 11th grades.](chart.png)

*Source: CA Healthy Kids Survey 2008-2016. Dr. Heidi Christensen, VCOE*
“Those initiating nonmedical use of prescription opioids at ages 10-12 years had the highest risk of transitioning to heroin use.”


The BreakThrough Student Assistant Program helps students and their families to navigate through the school system safely and successfully. BreakThrough welcomes middle or high school students and families in the Conejo Valley Unified School District to take advantage of unique systems of care to maximize health and minimize harms.

“One key accomplishment was having an active multi-agency collaboration to focus on student well-being. It’s having a focus on prevention and not disease. Everyone is looking through the lens of keeping kids in school.””
— Project BreakThrough Leader

Ventura County Friday Night Live Mentoring
Friday Night Live, Club Live, & Friday Night Live Kids are youth-led, youth-driven programs designed for Ventura County high school, middle school, and elementary school aged youth. The collective effect of youth-serving organizations combines leadership with innovative delivery of alcohol and other drug prevention and education.

BUZZ KILL, a two-site pilot program for site-specific Rx drug and heroin prevention and education, introduced the risks of sharing medication: Share Today. Gone Tomorrow.

Data-driven and youth focus group-informed graphic novels and posters developed by students. Formative evaluation initiated to measure goal of 25% reduction in 30-day opioid use.

Parent brochures in Spanish and English provide families tips on identifying and understanding painkiller and heroin abuse.
“My cousin wouldn’t be here today if naloxone hadn’t been there for us at that time and place. I saved his life—and then it kickstarted me to sign up for my own treatment the next week.”

– VENTURA COUNTY RESIDENT IN TREATMENT

Overall, what impact has participating in this program had on your drug use?

- Increased use: 9%
- No impact: 6%
- Decreased use: 28%
- N/A: 57%

Source: Overdose Prevention Program Data Update, Evalcorp 2017


Preventing Overdose

Naloxone is a safe and legal antidote to reverse an opioid overdose. It neutralizes the opioids (prescription pain meds, heroin or methadone), reverses the possible fatal side effects and helps someone breathe again.

The NO OD overdose prevention project works to educate family, friends, and loved ones about opioid overdose prevention. Targeted to groups at elevated risk for overdose, data collection helps to guide education and distribution.

The Rx & Heroin Workgroup, in partnership with Project SAFER, provides outreach and training, as well as rescue kits, to the Ventura County community.

LOCAL RESULTS

- **1,828** overdose rescue kits distributed countywide
- **29** distribution/education sites
- **257** lives saved!

OD Project Demographics

**Gender**

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**Age**

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<td>16%</td>
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**KIT RECIPIENTS’ RELATIONSHIP TO PERSON WHO OVERDOSED**

- 65% Friend
- 15% Spouse/significant other
- 11% Stranger
- 7% Family member
- 11% Another person
- 11% Themselves

**#1 Reason for Overdose:**

99% Reported OD Due to Heroin
(by itself or in combination with other drugs)
Not only is there lower drug-seeking behavior, but patients express appreciation for the care taken.  
– Clinic staff after “WE CHECK” launch

The Ventura County Rx Abuse & Heroin Workgroup collaborates with local partners to increase community awareness of the risks of opioid misuse and engage support for safe and secure disposal.

**WE CHECK because WE CARE**

Patients, family members and prescribers all benefit from WE CHECK policy and messaging starting at the clinic door. Eye-catching decals remind that public health and safety increase when prescription histories are verified.

Since 2009, over 19 tons of Rx drugs have been collected and destroyed by the Ventura County Rx Abuse & Heroin Workgroup partners in the Ventura County Sheriff’s Office.

Source: Ventura County Sheriff’s Office, December 2017
PLANE OF PILLS
Media Event 2016

To earn media attention and spread the word about the epidemic of painkiller overdoses, the workgroup hosted a press event to unveil the Plane of Pills campaign. Featuring concerns by the CA Department of Justice and the Ventura County Sheriff’s Office, resulting stories in local papers, radio and social media increased awareness of the enormity of the painkiller overdose problem.

Safe and Secure RX DRUG DISPOSAL

Recent data continue to support the need for ongoing and expanded availability of Rx drug disposal programs.

- **1 in 5 Ventura County teens** have abused prescription drugs.
- **Over 50%** get them for free from friends and family.
- **73% of Ventura County residents** surveyed indicated that prescription drugs, for uses not as prescribed, are “fairly easy” or “very easy” for teenagers to obtain.

APRIL 2017

Ventura County Board of Supervisors upheld Every Day is Take Back Day, with a resolution pledging continued safe and secure drug disposal.

Nearly 1 in 5 Ventura County residents have dropped off unused or expired Rx drugs at a County disposal bin.

Source: Ventura County Community Health Survey, 2014-15
“NALOXONE SAVES” EDUCATIONAL OUTREACH CAMPAIGN

The Naloxone Saves campaign was launched with billboards in the cities of Oxnard and Santa Paula in summer 2017, in both English and Spanish.

The campaign communicates the message that an overdose from opioids can happen to anyone, including loved ones, which can change the perception of who is at risk for an overdose. It inspires awareness and conversation about how the medication can save someone from an overdose due to opioids.

The Naloxone campaign is also being shared via social media channels, posters, print advertising and movie theatre ads.
Opioid Solutions Summit: Addressing the Twofold Epidemic

Keynote speaker Sam Quinones, author of Dreamland, and featured speaker Danny Trejo, actor, producer and recovery advocate, led the agenda of a countywide conference addressing the opioid crisis. Targeted sessions included:

- **REDUCING THE LOCAL TOLL:** Research, Rescue and Recovery
- **PRESCRIPTION FOR CHANGE:** The New Normal in Opioid Prescribing
- **THE INTERSECTION OF LAW ENFORCEMENT AND HEALTHCARE:** Reducing Opioid Supply and Demand

The Summit concluded with a unique opportunity for audience members to participate in assembling naloxone kits for the community.
Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT) for Opioid Abuse

“MAT is an essential component of an ongoing treatment plan, enabling opioid-addicted persons to regain control of their health and their lives.”
– NORA VOLKOW, MD, DIRECTOR, NIDA

Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT) is part of a “whole patient” approach, combining the use of approved medication along with counseling, therapy and other support for effective treatment of opioid use disorders. Buprenorphine (Suboxone®, Subutex®), methadone, or extended-release naltrexone (Vivitrol®) may be part of the treatment strategy.

• MAT is not a one-size-fits-all approach
• An individualized assessment and medical plan are required.
• MAT does not substitute one addiction for another.
• Medication can safely reduce opioid craving and withdrawal, allowing the brain to balance and heal during recovery.
• MAT decreases opioid misuse and reduces opioid-related overdoses and deaths.

HOW OPIOID TREATMENT MEDICATIONS WORK IN THE BRAIN

Interview with Patrick Zarate
Former Chair, Ventura County Rx Abuse & Heroin Workgroup

After six years as chair of the Ventura County Rx Abuse & Heroin Workgroup...

1. Where does Ventura County stand today in the opioid crisis, compared with 2012?
The scope and nature of the opioid epidemic is so broad, the impacts so deep, and the costs so catastrophic that no single strategy can address all the impacts. Indeed, there is no single solution. But this workgroup, with the support of policymakers, and the coordination of public and private resources, has begun to see some progress. And while we cannot predict how this epidemic will unfold, I am convinced we do have the right approach. Fatal overdoses from opioids has declined slightly and local youth are starting to beat prior drug use trends. Use of the overdose antidote naloxone is increasing, while access to opioid-targeted treatment is also on the rise. Finally, law enforcement is engaging prescribers to improve the prescription process. But while there may be indications of progress, we must continue to work together to address this epidemic by advancing our understanding, refining our strategies and expanding our support for effective solutions.

2. Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT) has become an essential component of recovery from opioid abuse disorder. Is this available locally and is it an effective tool for everyone?
Substance abuse disorders (SUD) occur due to changes in the brain caused by repeated drug use. These changes affect the resolve of someone with an addiction, despite their own efforts or possible consequences. That resolve is challenged daily, hourly, even by the minute, and most find it impossible to stop using. MAT reduces opioid craving and, with counseling, offers the best treatment combination. In Ventura County, we have two highly-regarded programs providing MAT: Western Pacific and Aegis Medical Systems. Together, they offer all forms of MAT (methadone, Suboxone and Vivitrol) and have an array of clinics under contract with VCBH. We’ve also recently launched a pilot program, in coordination with Ventura County Sheriff’s and Probation, that gives qualified inmates access to MAT prior to release, using Vivitrol, a once-a-month injection that helps prevent relapse and potential fatal consequences of an opioid overdose. MAT isn’t for everyone. However, I am convinced that the expansion of MAT access over the last few years has saved lives.

3. How does stigma play into the opioid crisis?
This epidemic has impacted every demographic — nationally and locally. Sadly, the impact is the same, regardless of your zip code. The science is clear on addiction: it is a brain-based disease. And while there may be behavioral elements, this is not a problem of weak will, moral failing or criminal behavior. Notions that drive stigma or perceptions of “the addict” are out-of-date and inconsistent with what we know from research. The Surgeon General recently said we need to make “a major cultural shift in the way we think about, talk about, look at and act toward people with substance use disorders. Negative attitudes...can be entrenched but it is possible to change social attitudes.” I would call on my local professional colleagues to lead the way in shifting these attitudes. We need to be not just better practitioners but better citizens.
The workgroup is proud to present this report, renewing our initial goals, objectives and activities first outlined in Ventura County Responds (2014). We are encouraged by the strength of our interagency collaboration which has expanded its membership to engage partners throughout the county system and the community.

Moving forward, target actions with measurable outcomes will include:

• Multiply the number and convenience of Rx disposal sites
• Identify and develop new entry points for treatment services
• Increase access to Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT)
• Expand overdose prevention training and naloxone kit availability
• Raise the perception of opioid harms, especially for youth

Together we can:

REDUCE OPIOID SUPPLY, REDUCE OPIOID DEMAND and SAVE LIVES
REDDUCING SUPPLY

Support Prescribers
• Safe prescribing guidelines for pain
• Prescriber training
• Easy access to online toolkits

Monitor Prescriptions
• Promote CURES 2.0 PDMP
• Partner with law enforcement to reduce diversion
• Expand safe & secure Rx drug disposal

Measure What Matters
• Use data to track and evaluate supply chain impacts
• Analyze PDMP data provided by CURES 2.0

REDDUCING DEMAND

Protect Youth & Family
• Raise perception of youth harms
• Reduce the age of first use
• Support school-based initiatives

Prevent Overdose
• Increase availability of OD prevention with Naloxone kits
• Disseminate NO OD information

Inform the Community
• Increase awareness of opioid risks and benefits
• Promote secure medication and safe Rx disposal
• Improve treatment opportunities

REFERENCES


MISSION: Save and improve lives by stopping prescription drug and heroin abuse.

PRIMARY GOAL: Decrease fatal opioid overdoses by 50% in Ventura County, compared to 2013 baseline.

CRITERIA FOR GOALS:
The selected goals and actions reflect:

- Data-indicated problems
- Defined scope and reach
- Measurable efficacy
- Agency leadership and responsibility
- Achievability
- Crosscutting strategies
- Cultural and linguistic relevance
- Sensitivity to stigma

TARGETS FOR ACTION

The Rx Abuse & Heroin Workgroup remains committed to parallel target areas based on countywide conditions and the alliance of a strong multiagency partnership.

Professional Development
Goal: Expand professional training and development across all sectors.

Enforcement and Security
Goal: Support law enforcement, monitoring and security to enhance public safety by deterring drug misuse, abuse and diversion.

Education and Awareness
Goal: Increase outreach and education for parents, patients and public to raise awareness of prescription drug abuse and heroin problems and solutions.

Safe Schools
Goal: Collaborate with schools, PTAs and Ventura County Office of Education (VCOE) to increase communication channels and prevention opportunities for teachers, parents, and students and school personnel.

Prevention Policy and Research
Goal: Advance continued research and data analysis to develop key policy actions addressing Rx and heroin abuse.
Dan Hicks, Chair
Ventura County Behavioral Health
Alcohol & Drug Programs, Prevention Services

PARTNERSHIP AGENCIES

Aegis

Community Memorial Health System

Gold Coast Health Plan

Los Robles Hospital and Medical Center

Project SAFER

Santa Paula West Medical Clinic and Pediatrics

SeaView IPA

Sterling Care Psychiatric Group

Ventura County Behavioral Health

Ventura County Behavioral Health Advisory Board

Ventura County Health Care Agency

Ventura County Interagency Pharmaceutical Crimes Unit

Ventura County Medical Center

Ventura County Medical Examiner Office

Ventura County Office of Education

Ventura County Probation Agency

Ventura County Public Health

Ventura County Sheriff’s Office

In addition to the above-named agencies, the Rx Abuse & Heroin Workgroup extends its thanks to the many local, state and regional collaborators who have participated in our efforts.
The Opioid Crisis: Ventura County Responds

The Opioid Crisis

Learn the Signs of Overdose

A Parent’s Story

For Prescribers

Medication Disposal

Help for Addiction

Media Toolkit info@venturacountyresponds.org

VenturaCountyResponds.org