



COLLABORATIVE STRATEGIC PLANNING

Opioid Settlements Case Study

OPIOID SETTLEMENTS IN NORTH CAROLINA

North Carolina is using \$1.4 billion in funding from the national opioid settlements to address the overdose crisis that continues to impact the state, where an estimated nine people die each day from overdose.¹ The North Carolina Memorandum of Agreement (NC MOA) governs the allocation, use, and reporting related to the opioid settlements and reflects a strong, shared commitment to transparency and accountability regarding the use and impact of funds. Based on the principle that those closest to the problem are closest to the solution, the NC MOA allocates 85% of funds to local governments and 15% to the state.

While local governments must spend the opioid settlement funds on abatement activities, they can choose which NC MOA strategies will best address their own community's needs. By investing opioid settlement funds in high-impact strategies listed in Exhibit A, local governments are helping to ensure that all people in North Carolina are healthy and have connections to supportive systems and services within a culture of care.

COLLABORATIVE STRATEGIC PLANNING IN THE NC MOA

The first strategy in Exhibit A is **Collaborative Strategic Planning** to address opioid misuse, addiction, overdose, or related issues. This strategy may include staff support, as well as costs associated with facilitating planning meetings or engaging stakeholders. Local governments can also use these funds to complete a 14-step planning process, detailed in Exhibit C of the

NC MOA, to develop a collaborative strategic plan for their community on the use of opioid settlement funds. The core purpose of this strategy is to enable local governments to be thoughtful and intentional about how they invest their settlement funds to have the greatest impact on the health and well-being of people with opioid use disorder (OUD) or those who use drugs.

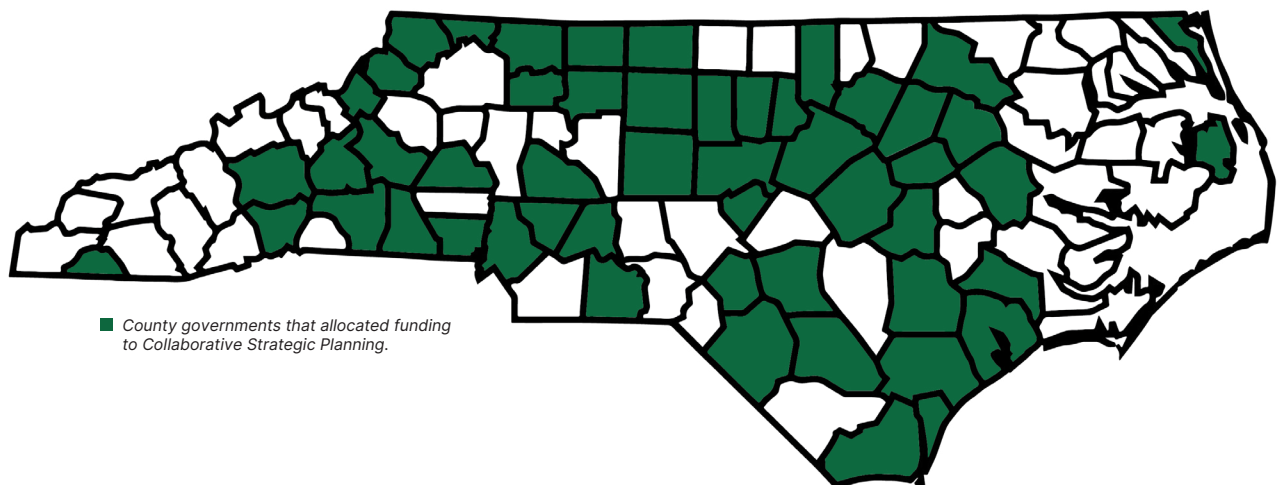
As of January 2025, 56 local governments have reported plans to spend funds on Collaborative Strategic Planning.

IMPLEMENTING COLLABORATIVE STRATEGIC PLANNING

The North Carolina Association of County Commissioners (NCACC) Opioid Settlements Technical Assistance Team (OSTAT) interviewed local governments across the state that had successfully planned for and implemented high-impact strategies funded by opioid settlements. Local government employees, key community partners, people with lived experience, and local elected officials discussed successes, challenges, and lessons learned. Key findings from these interviews are outlined below.

Expanding on Coalition Work

Many local governments found that planning for and coordinating the use of opioid settlement funds was a priority for their communities to avoid duplication of efforts and identify gaps in services. Having skilled staff dedicated to organizing the process helped communities maintain momentum for planning, be intentional and



1. Cox MB. Current Data and Future Directions. Presented as part of NCDHHS Opioid Prescription Drug Abuse Advisory Committee (OPDAAC) Meeting; September 20, 2024; Raleigh, NC. [View link.](#)

thorough in gaining perspectives from a wide range of stakeholders and gather and use local data to inform their decision making.

Before the introduction of opioid settlement funds, many communities had already established grant-funded coalitions focused on substance use and overdose prevention. Interviewees felt that it was important to engage with these coalitions, as well as with other groups that had undertaken related planning. “The people who had done that work needed to understand that their work had value and that we weren’t starting over, but that we were really building on the work they’d already done.”

It was equally important, though, to expand upon these existing coalitions. First, the NC MOA specifies 10 diverse stakeholder groups to engage in the Collaborative Strategic Planning process. Second, being intentional about bringing together diverse players in the community, including those who may have been critical of the process, was key to increasing consensus and early buy-in from key stakeholders.

Bringing together the key players also promoted collaboration rather than competition. For example, a local health department regularly collaborated with partner organizations to jointly apply for grants and maximize their collective impact.

“This process is messy. We don’t get it right everytime and that’s ok – you learn from mistakes. It’s ok to think big; you don’t have to minimize your ideas.”

Data Collection for Planning

Local governments also conducted different data collection activities during the planning process. Town halls held in multiple locations, community surveys, focus groups, and meetings with subject matter experts and local decisionmakers were all important steps in gathering information and perspectives while building broad buy-in for the planning process. Local governments invited formal and informal leaders from historically marginalized communities to join the planning process and hosted focus groups with individuals from these communities. The input obtained from these efforts was meaningfully integrated into the strategy prioritization process, reflecting actual engagement rather than tokenistic “inclusion.”

By expanding on coalition work and collecting data, local governments have been able to leverage input and buy-

in to achieve genuine consensus on priority strategies. Additional successes include receiving quick approval from governing boards and giving a voice to people who “aren’t used to being heard in certain communities.”

“I truly cannot highlight enough the importance of leveraging our relationships with individuals who already have established trust and credibility with those populations and not trying to go in cold with some expectation that because I’m bringing you pizza, you’re going to just instantly trust me. I know you’re not, and I don’t blame you.”

PATHWAYS TO PROGRESS

People with lived/living experience may have low trust in government agencies and be hesitant to “out” themselves by engaging in formal meetings. To **engage people with lived experience** in the planning process, local governments used confidential data collection methods (like community surveys and focus groups) and partnered with trusted organizations (such as local harm reduction organizations).

Opioid settlement funds have certain requirements and restrictions. Interviewees noted the need to **balance “making space for all ideas” while clearly communicating what is and is not allowable under the settlement terms**. One local government found that conducting sequential intercept mapping (SIM — a process of assessing the assets and touchpoints for individuals interfacing with the legal system) with neutral facilitators was a successful approach to strategizing on how to improve community well-being and avoid ineligible punitive approaches. Similarly, community members may support strategies that are not immediately achievable. Local governments, therefore, may need to take an incremental approach in strategy selection and implementation. As one interviewee put it, they sometimes had to “walk the thin line of doing the most good without upsetting people.”

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

1. Hire a **dedicated staff member** who is paid sufficiently to prevent turnover and who can keep the planning process moving while building capacity for future program oversight and reporting.

2. Obtain a **skilled, neutral facilitator** who can ensure that all parties are heard, respected, and invested in the process.
3. Ensure staff have a good understanding of **data collection and evaluation** so that they can use data to identify overdose trends, track effectiveness, and course-correct when needed.
4. Use an **inclusive and thoughtful** approach to Collaborative Strategic Planning to improve feasibility and community buy-in of the plan.

RESOURCES

Technical Assistance

NCACC strives to support local governments in utilizing opioid settlement funds to maximize resources and impact through technical assistance, outreach and training, and collaboration. Visit the NCACC OSTAT webpage at www.ncacc.org/opioidsettlement or contact opioidsettlement@ncacc.org.

CORE-NC

The Community Opioid Resources Engine for North Carolina (CORE-NC) website contains a wealth of information about the utilization of settlement funds in North Carolina. Dashboards display data and visuals on local spending plans, past spending, impact reporting, and state trends. Visit the CORE-NC website at www.ncopioidsettlement.org.

Strategy-Specific Measures Models

These measures models were designed to help local governments report on process, quality, and outcome measures associated with the planning and implementation of opioid abatement strategies. To learn more, visit www.ncacc.org/opioid-measures-models.