POST-OVERDOSE RESPONSE TEAMS

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.

POST-OVERDOSE RESPONSE TEAMS IN THE NC MOA

The eighth strategy in Exhibit A is **Post-Overdose Response Teams** (PORT) that "connect persons who have experienced non-fatal drug overdoses to addiction treatment, recovery support, harm reduction services, primary healthcare, or other services or supports they need to improve their health or well-being." People who have experienced a non-fatal overdose are at higher risk of experiencing overdose again.[2] PORT strives to connect overdose survivors and people who are at risk of opioid overdose with supportive services to help prevent future overdoses and offer pathways to wellness.
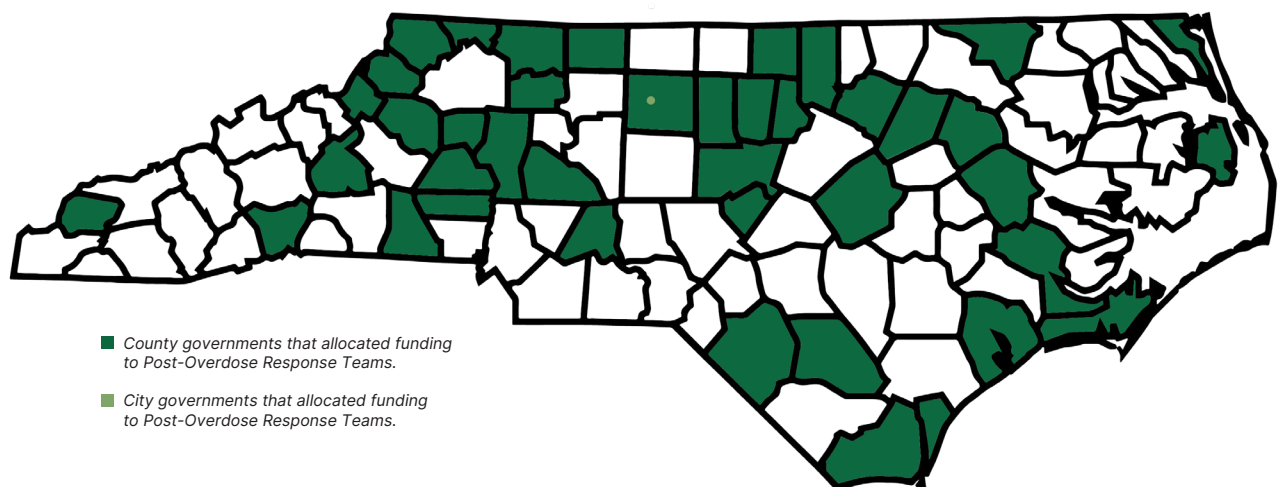
As of January 2025, 43 local governments had reported plans to spend funds on Post-Overdose Response Teams.

IMPLEMENTING POST-OVERDOSE RESPONSE TEAMS

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.

Building on Prior Efforts

Before opioid settlement funding came to their community, one local government had an established PORT program that came to a halt during COVID due to increased demands on EMS. During the pandemic, overdose numbers increased. Once COVID-related demands decreased, lessons learned about community engagement during COVID, coupled with the PORT program's good reputation for connecting people to

■ County governments that allocated funding to Post-Overdose Response Teams.

■ City governments that allocated funding to Post-Overdose Response Teams.

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.

2 Caudarella A, Dong H, Milloy MJ, Kerr T, Wood E, Hayashi K. Non-fatal overdose as a risk factor for subsequent fatal overdose among people who inject drugs. Drug Alcohol Depend. 2016 May 1;162:51-5. doi: 10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2016.02.024.

services, led to community buy-in to restart the PORT program. Local governments have also built upon prior efforts by visiting programs in other counties and learning from their peers' experiences.

Engaging Key Community Partners

Key partners included people with lived/living experience (PWLE), local health departments, syringe service programs (SSPs), local universities, reentry councils, recovery communities, local support groups, and technical assistance providers. By connecting with PWLE in the community through SSPs, local governments were able to develop a deeper understanding of what was needed from PORTs. People who had lost loved ones to overdose were often advocates for PORT, helping to build community buy-in. People in decision-making roles with prior experience with substance use disorder also helped build widespread support for the program. Peer support specialists are extremely valuable partners, especially in their ability to work alongside clinicians and case managers to connect people to services. Other key supporters of PORT efforts were local elected officials, county administrators, and faith communities who provided services to people who use drugs.

Looking Toward the Future

Local governments that successfully implemented PORT considered ways to expand services. Based on data from an annual Community Needs Assessment, one local government identified that overdose rates among people from marginalized communities required urgent attention. The PORT then dedicated itself to finding staff who could engage people from marginalized communities and reach individuals at higher risk. The local government also supported these staff members in their professional development, helping them become recognized experts in the field. Another local government is hoping to expand its PORT services to offer bridge medications for opioid use disorder (MOUD), providing immediate access to MOUD to support individuals who have experienced an overdose until they can be seen by a provider for ongoing addiction treatment.

PATHWAYS TO PROGRESS
Key Considerations

Local governments that successfully implemented PORT understood that **engaging people with lived/living experience** was critical to their success and noted that it took time and effort to build trust. During planning, partnerships with SSPs helped elevate the voices of PWLE when they were hesitant to engage directly with local government staff or elected officials. During implementation, some PWLE who had experienced overdose were reluctant to engage with PORT members.

Realizing this, the PORT partnered with a local reentry council to better connect with participants. This relationship helped build trust between PWLE and PORT staff. Having members of a PORT attend local support groups hosted by faith communities was also beneficial for building relationships with PWLE. Local governments noted that stigma related to people who use drugs was an impediment to trust and explained that being sincere and consistent in the ways they showed up in their communities was key in addressing this potential barrier. As one noted, "This work is all about building relationships with people who are disenfranchised."

PORT programs also had to consider logistics regarding **hiring policies and resource restrictions**. Hiring peer support professionals to work in county and city agencies with policies against hiring individuals with past incarceration can be a daunting (but not impossible) process. Peer support specialists are vital to the work of PORT. Local governments may need to adopt more flexible hiring policies in order to hire people whose experiences most closely align with the people they will be serving — experiences that make them better qualified to make connections and understand their participants. PORT staff also discussed that treatment center restrictions (such as not taking individuals with co-occurring conditions or without insurance) made building partnerships with diverse local resources even more important.

> ### "You've got to have the backing behind your EMS system, people in your community that go to bat for what you do and make sure you have what you need."

Local governments shared that **collecting data that measures program** success can be a challenge, as success is not always clearly defined. Those involved with PORT noted that, many times, they are looking for any positive change for their participants, and this lens is crucial for understanding how the program is impacting people's lives. Local governments also noted that "success" should encompass things like community perceptions of PORT, which can be difficult to measure but are still needed to show a positive impact.

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR IMPLEMENTATION

1. **Train staff and partners on trauma-informed principles** to reduce stigma and bias and to improve service delivery and staff retention.
2. **Engage people with lived/living experience** at

every step of the planning, implementation, and evaluation process so that PORT programs are responsive to evolving community needs and provide services in ways that work.

3. **Focus on accomplishments at every level** by celebrating individual successes (e.g., reduction in overdose risk for one person) as well as larger programmatic quality measures (e.g., rate of successful referrals to services) and population outcomes (e.g., decrease in fatal overdose), to prevent staff burnout and share the achievements of PORT.

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.

Trauma-Informed Counties Training

NCACC offers recorded training on the widespread impacts of trauma, principles of trauma-informed care, pathways to healing, and creating trauma-informed workplaces and communities. To learn more, visit www.ncacc.org/events-training/trauma-informed-counties-in-practice and scroll to "TIC Trainings (Online Version)."

Post-Overdose Response Teams: A NACo Opioid Solutions Strategy Brief

This strategy brief from the National Association of Counties (NACo) offers information and best practices for planning and implementing PORT programs. Visit www.naco.org/resource/osc-port to read the brief.

Peer Support Resources

CORE-NC has consolidated recommended resources for local governments interested in incorporated peer support specialists into their programs. For more information, visit www.ncopioidsettlement.org/strategy/recovery-support.