



RECOVERY SUPPORT SERVICES

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.

RECOVERY SUPPORT SERVICES IN THE NC MOA

The third strategy in Exhibit A is **Recovery Support Services**. This strategy is defined in the NC MOA as services "including peer support specialists or care navigators based in local health departments, social service offices, detention facilities, community-based organizations, or other settings that support people in treatment or recovery, or people who use drugs, in accessing addiction treatment, recovery support, harm

reduction services, primary healthcare, or other services or supports they need to improve their health or well-being." At its core, this strategy is about support and connections, and its broad definition allows communities to use funds to address a wide range of needs for people who use drugs.

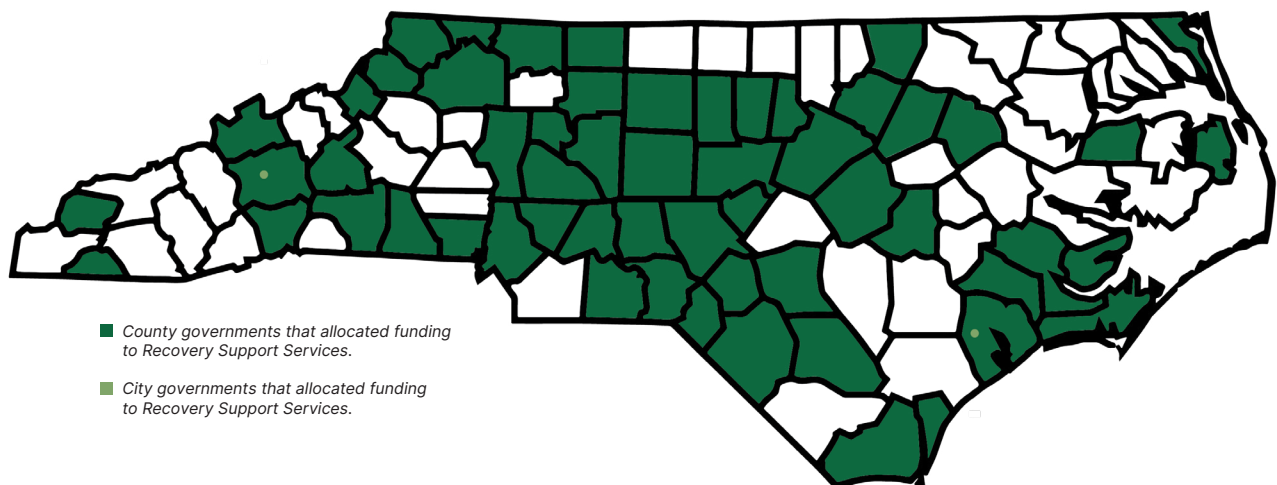
As of January 2025, 59 local governments had reported plans to spend funds on Recovery Support Services.

IMPLEMENTING RECOVERY SUPPORT SERVICES

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 spoke about successes, challenges, and lessons learned. Key findings from these interviews are outlined below.

First Understanding Community Needs

In one community, a formal needs assessment identified substance use as a local concern and found that there were no recovery support services offered in the community. In another, local government staff met more informally with community partners to better understand the service array available to those looking for assistance with treatment and recovery. In addition to opioid settlement funds, some communities were able to utilize previous funding from federal agencies



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.](#)

and private foundations to plan for and bolster their existing programs. Local governments also leveraged existing relationships between key partners, such as a local recovery center with a good relationship with law enforcement, or a recovery community collaborative that educates government staff, officials, and other providers about services and supports available in the community. Communities where the Recovery Support Services strategy has been successfully implemented benefited from support of local officials. Those with successful programs also noted that having individual local advocates to express community needs has been crucial to the planning and implementation process.

Compassion, Flexibility, and Warm Hand-Offs

Local governments noted several factors that helped them with designing and implementing Recovery Support Services. One of those factors is providing a variety of flexible services with compassion and empathy, understanding that what works for one person's recovery may not work for others. Creating a culture of acceptance that embraces all people who are seeking services is important. One provider explained, "We're all in recovery from something. We should treat people with the same compassion that we would want for ourselves or our families." Some local government agencies provide flexible funding for staff to support participant needs as they arise (e.g., money for a cell phone to keep in contact with health services, transportation to treatment). Others build flexibility into where services are provided (e.g., meeting with people in the jail to ensure connections to services prior to and upon release). Warm hand-offs between peer support specialists and case managers improved connections to services like evidence-based addiction treatment, harm reduction (such as through syringe service programs), and primary healthcare.

"It's not our job to fix people, but we can hold their hand and provide support while they work on themselves."

Hiring and Supervising Peer Support Specialists Effectively

Under the Recovery Support Services strategy, peer support specialists are people with personal experience with substance use disorders who provide support to individuals in need of or receiving services. Local governments have used opioid settlement funds to hire peer support specialists to support people in jails, at local recovery centers, or through Post-Overdose Response Teams. Being intentional about hiring peer support specialists is important. Designing a thoughtful interview and selection process and integrating peers

with other county staff (rather than contracting peers through an outside agency) has been key to program success. One peer support specialist highlighted the importance of finding the right staff and emphasized how critical these roles are to Recovery Support Services by saying, "Peers are just like everyone else, but they have overcome significant challenges in their lives. They've seen hell on earth, and they are going back into the fire that almost took them to drag others out. Not everyone who is a peer can do that, nor do you want them to, because sometimes it can cause harm."

PATHWAYS TO PROGRESS

Key Considerations

Since **peer support specialists** are vital to successful delivery of Recovery Support Services, it is important that they have the professional guidance and support they need. One local government formed a task force of peer support specialists, which identifies programmatic issues and emerging needs of community members and provides an opportunity for peers to network and share resources between organizations. Hiring peers directly as county employees allowed for better integration, increased team cohesiveness, and streamlined processes between peers, Emergency Medical Services staff, and other county personnel. Local governments can also support peers in obtaining training and supervision on ethics and setting safe boundaries.

Another key consideration is the **strength of the area's service provider referral network** and its capacity to support warm hand-offs and data sharing. Some local governments found it challenging to understand what services local agencies were providing and to know what resources were available to individuals who use drugs and/or are in recovery. Other local governments noted limited resources, both in amount (e.g., lack of adequate recovery housing options, limited pool of trained peer support specialists) and in fit (e.g., eligibility requirements that pose barriers to care, religious requirements that may not be a good fit for those seeking services). Once resources were identified, local governments had to ask themselves the following questions:

- How will those needing services get connected to the agencies and organizations providing them?
- What data-sharing agreements need to be put in place to make connections seamless?
- How will network partners work together to ensure people are connected to the services they need?
- How will partners collect and share data to support effective communication and evaluation?
- What is the best way to identify individuals and track continuity of services across programs while protecting privacy?

Local governments also shared their desire to honor the commitments they have made to community members to **sustain Recovery Support Services over the long term**. Some local governments noted that if they continue spending at their current rate, by fiscal year 2028, their program costs will be more than their expected opioid settlement allocation. Some are working with providers to better understand the Medicaid billing process as a potential supplement to settlement investments, though interviewees felt that inflexible service definitions and the requirements to “fit everybody into a box” made Medicaid billing particularly challenging. Some local governments have seen a decrease in demand for crisis services occurring as they have implemented Recovery Support Services, though demand for supports like recovery housing has increased.

Signs of Success and Recommendations for Implementation

Some local governments defined success in implementing Recovery Support Services as participants developing relationships with service providers and remaining engaged in care, while others pointed to any improvement in quality of life or health outcomes. Most noted that it is important to empower participants to define what success in recovery means for themselves. As a local service provider said, “People want, they want data ... some number, some something that you can tie to it and say like, ‘this is how successful we are.’ But doing harm reduction work and doing recovery work in general, like that’s the whole point – that people are supposed to define their own version of success.”

Measurable signs of success that local governments may see while implementing Recovery Support Services include an increasing number of people with opioid use disorder being connected to and using services, as well as individuals meeting major personal milestones. One local government shared in its Annual Impact Report, “Many individuals served by these programs were able to resolve legal issues, repair relationships with family members, reengage in their child’s life, and provide financially, [and] find employment, housing, transportation, and support groups to build their recovery community.”

Local governments recommended **demonstrating flexibility, patience, and responsiveness** when implementing Recovery Support Services. One interviewee shared that there are people who need these services but work full-time during the day, so offering services during extended hours is a necessary accommodation. When asked what other local governments should know, one staff member said, “This is hard work, and it’s OK if it takes a long time to plan and implement.” Local governments have also had to address the stigma associated with

addiction. This stigma posed an initial barrier to strategy implementation, meaning some local providers had to be careful of broadly advertising the recovery-related services they provide. One local government noticed a disproportionate increase in overdose deaths in their Black and American Indian populations and worked with community organizations that focused on serving these communities to create a culturally responsive recovery and healing center. Other partners have demonstrated their responsiveness to community needs by hiring bilingual staff and translating materials into different languages.

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.

Warm Hand-Offs: A NACo Opioid Solutions Strategy Brief

This strategy brief from the National Association of Counties (NACo) offers examples of, and best practices for, warm hand-off programs. View the strategy brief at www.naco.org/resource/osc-warm-hand-offs.

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.