



Overdose Prevention Site Community Engagement Project*: Phase 2 Report Executive Summary

Sue Pickett, Ph.D., Lauren Feig, M.A., Lauren Pass,
MPH, Diana Zawojksa, MPP, and Lauren Noelle



ahpnet.com

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Overdose Prevention Site Community Engagement Project: Phase 2 Report Executive Summary

There were nearly 3,000 opioid overdose deaths in Illinois in 2020. While opioid overdose deaths have been increasing since 2013, we had a 33% increase in opioid overdose deaths from 2019 to 2020. Statewide, non-Hispanic Blacks had the highest opioid overdose fatality rate and were more than twice as likely to die from any drug overdose than non-Hispanic Whites. In Chicago, since 2018 and continuing through 2020, opioid overdose deaths are the highest among non-Hispanic Blacks, with West Side communities experiencing the greatest number of these deaths.

Overdose prevention sites (OPS) save lives. We need targeted efforts to reduce opioid overdose deaths on the West Side and save lives. Overdose prevention sites (OPS) are legally sanctioned health service facilities that allow people to use pre-obtained drugs under the supervision of trained staff, such as nurses. OPS give people a safe, clean place to use their drugs and staff who can step in immediately and administer naloxone, a drug that reverses opioid overdoses. OPS also provide opportunities to educate people about opioid use disorder (OUD) and substance use disorder (SUD) and recovery, and connect people to treatment, medical care, housing, and other services. In addition to saving lives, OPS teach people about OUD/SUD and recovery, connect them to substance use treatment, medical care and other services, and improve public safety.

OPS can't happen without community support. Since March 2020, the OPS Community Engagement project, which is led by the West Side Heroin/Opioid Task Force and funded by the Illinois Department of Human Services/Division of Substance Use Prevention and Recovery (IDHS/SUPR), has been reaching out to West Side community members about OPS. Our project activities educate West Side community members about OPS, and ask for and listen to their concerns about having an OPS on the West Side. Project activities include:

- Convening a local expert panel and a community advisory council that includes West Side residents, business and faith leaders, social service and healthcare providers, and people who use drugs to provide input on OPS community education, engagement, and planning activities.
- Collecting survey data on community members' opinions about OPS benefits and concerns.
- Conducting focus groups to hear directly from specific groups of community members (residents, business leaders, police officers, etc.) about how an OPS might help—or hurt—the West Side's efforts to reduce overdose deaths.
- Creating and distributing educational materials in English and Spanish for community members and law enforcement.
- Convening virtual town hall meetings for community members to learn about and ask questions about OPS start-up from Canadian OPS operators.

Despite COVID-19 restrictions, we were able to engage West Side community members in several activities during Phase 2 of our project (July 2020-June 2021). We share a brief overview of these activities in this Executive Summary. These activities are described in more detail in our *Overdose Prevention Site Community Engagement Project: Phase 2 Report*. For a copy of the report, contact Lee Rusch at westsidetaskforce@yahoo.com or Dr. Sue Pickett at spickett@ahpnet.com.

Local Expert Panel and Community Advisory Council

Our local expert panel includes 23 individuals who represent West Side substance use treatment, harm reduction, healthcare and social service organizations, state and local government representatives, business and faith leaders, people who use illicit drugs (PWUD), law enforcement, and IDHS/SUPR, the

Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH), and the Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH). Our community advisory council includes 21 West Side community members. These groups met virtually during Phase 2. Local expert panel and community advisory council members distributed education materials, helped recruit focus group participants, and shared information about our community engagement survey. They also shared information about and participated in our virtual town hall meetings with West Side community members.

Community Engagement Survey

The OPS Community Engagement Survey asks West Side community members about the potential benefits an OPS could provide for the West Side and their concerns about having an OPS in their community. The survey also asks for feedback on strategies to address community members' concerns. The survey is available in English and Spanish, and be filled out online or on paper. All surveys are anonymous and confidential. A total of 573 people completed a survey. Most of the survey participants were Black West Side residents.

- **OPS Benefits:** 88% of survey participants reported that an OPS would be a good thing/beneficial for the West. Survey participants told us that an OPS would reduce overdoses and save lives. Other potential OPS benefits include:
 - Connecting people to substance use treatment, medical care, housing and other recovery support services.
 - Making West Side neighborhoods safer.
 - Reducing the number of people who use drugs in public places.
 - Teaching West Side community members and people who use drugs about opioids and how to prevent overdoses.
- **OPS Concerns:** Only 22% of survey participants reported that they had fears or concerns about having an OPS on the West Side. These fears and concerns include:
 - An OPS will bring more people who use drugs to the West Side.
 - Drug selling, gang activity and crime will increase.
 - Law enforcement will target people who use the OPS and will spend more time watching the OPS instead of taking care of other crimes in the community.
 - An OPS will put a strain on West Side healthcare and social services.
- **Strategies to Address OPS Concerns:** Survey participants suggested that we address people's OPS concerns by providing information to community members on the following topics:
 - Why we need an OPS on the West Side.
 - How OPS have helped communities that are similar to the West Side.
 - OPS benefits.

While the majority of all survey participants reported that an OPS would be a good thing for the West Side, Black survey participants, particularly those who live on the West Side, were more likely than White survey participants to report fears and concerns about having an OPS on the West Side.

Focus Groups

Focus groups give us an opportunity to gather detailed information about specific OPS benefits and concerns from West Side community members. We have conducted a total of seven focus groups with the following community members: social service providers who work on the West Side, PWUD, West

Side residents, business and faith leaders, social service providers who serve West Side community members who are Latinx, and Chicago Police Department (CPD) officers who work on the West Side. Common comments across focus groups include:

- **OPS Benefits:** Focus group participants reported several OPS benefits including:
 - An OPS will save lives, connect PWUD to needed services, and provide opportunities for PWUD to stop or decrease their substance use. *“People are dying. If we can save one person’s life, it’s worth it.”*
 - Community and family education about OUD/SUD: An OPS could educate the community and family members of PWUD that OUD/SUD is a disease, and that relapse is part of the recovery process *“An OPS could increase community awareness about helping PWUD. Hearing about opioids...it is a disease; we have to do something to make it better for them.”*
- **OPS Concerns:** Focus group participants shared several concerns about having an OPS on the West Side. These include:
 - OPS safety and security: Who will provide security? How will clients and staff be kept safe? Will PWUD use an OPS if there is a strong police presence? There will be more violent behavior in and around the OPS, and more police calls. *“If you keep calling the police and people don’t feel safe, the community will shut down the OPS”.*
 - OPS location: OPS should not be located near schools or residential neighborhoods. The physical structure should be warm and welcoming so PWUD will use it.
 - Increased crime and drug sales: An OPS will bring more gangs and drug selling to the West Side. *“Drug dealers will have steady customers – they will set up shop outside the OPS”.*
 - Youth use of OPS: Will youth be allowed to use the OPS? Should they be allowed to use an OPS? *“An OPS sends a mixed message to our youth about drugs. It tells them that it is ok to use drugs when we try to help them not get involved with drugs”.*
 - Loss of business due to an OPS: An OPS will increase crime and drive businesses out of the neighborhood where an OPS is located. It will scare customers away. *“New businesses will be reluctant to open up on the same street as an OPS”.*
 - Immigration status of Latinx PWUD: Having to provide any type of identification and documentation may prevent PWUD who are Latinx from using the OPS. *“They have to know that they won’t be asked too many questions or asked for IDs. If they know the OPS is anonymous, that will reduce their fear of using it.”*
- **Community Engagement Strategies:** Focus group participants suggested that we consider the following strategies to share information about OPS with West Side community members:
 - Address OPS funding and sustainability issues and be transparent: The West Side has a long history of services “coming and going”. What will happen to the OPS when funding goes away?
 - Provide data on how OPS help communities similar to the West Side: Share research results that show how an OPS has helped Black and Latinx PWUD who live in communities that are similar to the West Side.
 - Hire West Side community members and community health workers to provide OPS services: Hire people who live in and know the community; don’t rely on outsiders who don’t know us. Use community resources and partner with West Side businesses, churches, and service organizations.

- Partner with law enforcement: Build relationships with CPD commanders and officers who serve the West Side. Include CPD leadership in OPS planning activities and make sure that they are involved in developing OPS security policies and procedures.
- Educate the community about harm reduction: Share information about harm reduction and how OPS save lives by meeting people where they're at; that abstinence does not work for everyone; and that relapse happens and is part of recovery. Offer naloxone training. *“Abstinence doesn't work for everyone. People are going to relapse, and that's ok. The OPS can help keep them alive. A dead person can't get treatment.”*
- Conduct a pilot study to document OPS use and effectiveness: Collect data “from Day 1” to document who uses the OPS, what services they use, and OPS service outcomes. Collect data on arrests and CPD calls to the OPS. Use pilot study data to help promote and sustain the OPS.
- Address the needs of Latinx PWUD: Make sure that the OPS has bilingual staff and understands the important role of families in the lives of Latinx PWUD. Do not require IDs to use OPS services.

Open House Events

We held two Zoom open house events for West Side community members to learn more about OPS. The first event, held in March 2021, was a “watch party” on the role of law enforcement in OPS. Fifty-five people participated in this event. The group watched a webinar from the Law Enforcement Action Partnership and Global Law Enforcement and Public Health Association (LEAP/GLEPHA) that shared information on partnering with law enforcement on OPS. After watching the webinar, Inspector Conor King of the Victoria, British Columbia (Canada) Police Department, shared his experiences working with an OPS in Victoria with participants. The second event, held in May 2021, was a Zoom meeting with three Canadian OPS operators. Each OPS operator gave an overview of their respective facility and described their OPS implementation and community engagement process. Forty-five people participated in this event. Discussion topics included: OPS rules and regulations; strategies for welcoming and encouraging PWUD to use the OPS; community engagement “tips”; and partnerships with law enforcement.

Community Education Materials

Community education materials include a one-page infographic for the general community that describes the opioid crisis, its impact on the West Side, and the public health benefits of OPS, and a one-page infographic for PWUD that describes OPS and the benefits to PWUD and the community. The infographics are available in English and Spanish. We also created an educational brief for law enforcement that provides an overview of OPS, the public health and safety benefits of OPS, the role of law enforcement in developing and implementing OPS, and the potential advantages of locating and OPS on the West Side. The community education materials are available in online and paper formats. A copy of each of these materials is included in our June 2020 report:

<https://www.dhs.state.il.us/OneNetLibrary/27896/documents/OPS.pdf>

We shared electronic copies of the infographics with survey, focus group and open house event participants. The law enforcement brief was shared with two West Side CPD commanders. Local expert panel members, community advisory council members and the West Side Heroin/Opioid Task Force also distributed materials electronically to West Side community members. Paper copies of the infographics were distributed by West Side Heroin/Opioid Task Force and Prevention Partnership outreach teams to PWUD. These outreach teams also distributed paper copies of the infographics to local business owners.

Next Steps

We have seen a dramatic increase in opioid overdose deaths in Illinois in the past year, especially on the West Side. OPS community engagement and education activities need to continue to address these deaths and save lives. We suggest that the next steps for this project include:

- Address community members' concerns about OPS location, rules and regulations, and funding and sustainability. Work with the community advisory council to identify opportunities to meet with community members to discuss these concerns.
- Actively engage West Side CPD leadership in OPS planning activities. Identify a CPD liaison who can build relationships between CPD and OPS "leadership" (e.g., West Side Heroin/Opioid Task Force, IDHS/SUPR, CDPH, community advisory council). Work together to develop mutually-agreed upon OPS security policies and procedures.
- Actively engage West Side CPD officers and first responders in community education and engagement events. Work with local expert panel and community advisory group members to distribute the law enforcement education brief to West Side CPD districts.
- Conduct key informant interviews with West Side providers to identify potential OPS models, operations, and partnerships.
- Not all social service providers are "on board" and believe that an OPS will be beneficial to the West Side. Hold focus groups with West Side abstinence-based organizations, recovery homes and certified peer recovery specialists to learn about their OPS concerns.
- Work with the community advisory council to identify social service organizations to discuss how the OPS can be staffed and managed by community members, community health workers and others who are invested in the West Side.
- Work with organizations that serve people on the West Side who are Latinx to identify and implement activities to educate Latinx PWUD and their families about OUD/SUD and OPS.
- Work with harm reduction organizations to develop and deliver targeted outreach and messaging about OPS to PWUD. Outreach efforts should include conversations with PWUD about OPS as well as short surveys that ask whether and how they would use the OPS, and their preferred location for the OPS (i.e., whether they would be more likely to use an OPS that is located near the spot where they normally use drugs versus an OPS that is co-located within a healthcare facility).
- Now that Illinois has re-opened, hold in-person open house events, including a model or 'pop-up' OPS that community members can tour. Community education materials should be distributed at open house events. Virtual events also should be held to address safety concerns and needs of people who may not be vaccinated.
- Work with the community advisory council to hold virtual and/or in-person listening sessions with Black West Side residents to address their OPS concerns. Identify and implement strategies to address these concerns, such as inviting OPS operators in Toronto, and Toronto citizens who live near OPS, to share their experiences with residents.
- Address concerns about OPS and youth: Will youth be allowed to use the OPS? Should there be messaging about OPS that targets youth?

For more information about the OPS Community Engagement Project, contact Lee Rusch at westsidetaskforce@yahoo.com.