

## Implementation Profile: Ross County Health District

### Case Study Snapshot



[Ross County Health District](#) (RCHD) utilizes multiple programs to provide overdose education and naloxone distribution (OEND) to people who use drugs. After data revealed a spike in overdoses in 2021, RCHD began to ramp up their overdose prevention efforts and focused on making naloxone more common and available in their community. Efforts to improve naloxone access focused not only on residents, but also took into account the needs of individuals traveling on US Route 23, a heavily trafficked highway that cuts through the center of the county. Collaboration with partners from the Hope Partnership Program, a steering committee of organizations committed to addressing substance use and mental health in Ross County, has led to the implementation of harm reduction vending machines and the establishment of the post overdose response team (PORT) program.

Key overdose prevention strategies include:

- Regular participation in the Hope Partnership Program
- Post overdose response teams (PORT)
- Naloxboxes
- Collaboration with the local jail to provide OEND to individuals upon release
- Harm reduction vending machines
- Outreach to unhoused individuals

### Ross County, Ohio<sup>1</sup>

**Overdose Fatalities (2023): 45**

**Population (2023): 76,501**

**Square Mileage: 689.2**

### Program Description

RCHD participates in the Hope Partnership Program, alongside several community-based organizations, the hospital system, Ross County Veterans Services, the local school system, public libraries, and local substance use treatment agencies. This behavioral health collaboration is intended to share resources, ensure organizations are not duplicating efforts, and identify gaps in critical services. To achieve these goals, the steering committee created a strategic plan and identified that increased distribution of harm reduction resources was a pressing need in Ross County.

Since 2019, RCHD has partnered with local EMS, law enforcement, and peer navigators on the PORT program to provide follow-up and resources, including naloxone, to individuals who have experienced a reported overdose and family/friends/witnesses at the scene. With RCHD, the PORT includes representatives from the sheriff's office, police department, State Highway Patrol, one EMS agency, and Ross County Community Action (RCCA), a statewide nonprofit organization that provides community resources and employs peer navigators. The goal is for all EMS agencies operating in Ross County to become part of the PORT partnership.

RCHD also makes naloxone available through several other mechanisms including a mail-order program, secondary distribution in collaboration with partners, and emergency naloxoboxes placed throughout the county. In addition, they have partnered with the local jail to provide naloxone in the re-entry resource kits that are distributed to all individuals upon their release from jail. Educational materials, such as brochures, posters, and/or video resources on how to administer naloxone are made available whenever or wherever naloxone is distributed.

## Overdose Education and Naloxone Distribution to People Who Use Drugs

Within Ross County, there are currently six harm reduction vending machines primarily located at local libraries, with one located in a houseless



shelter/resource center. RCHD supplies naloxone and Adena Health System, the local hospital system, supplies other materials such as safer use kits, wound care kits, sharps containers, safer sex kits, pregnancy tests, and hygiene kits. RCHD and their partners were exploring ways to make harm reduction materials and resources more readily available when they were presented with the opportunity to purchase and install harm reduction vending machines as participants in the National Institute of Health's HEALing Communities Study. They began the planning process in late 2022 and the harm reduction vending machines have been operational since November 2023. When deciding where to place the harm reduction vending machines, RCHD considered insights from overdose hotspot data, input from Hope Partnership Program partners, and an evaluation of spaces that met structural needs, such as covered areas that had access to electricity and Internet.

RCHD has also developed print and digital educational materials on naloxone administration. Post-

ers and brochures are available at all naloxboxes and harm reduction vending machine locations with instructions on overdose prevention and response using naloxone. Using grant funding, RCHD was able to develop an instructional video that is available when participating in the mail order naloxone program. Print materials are widely distributed to ensure people who use drugs and anyone likely to witness or experience overdose will have access to this information, regardless of their comfort level directly interacting with health department staff.

## Data

RCHD has used various data sources to inform their program planning, implementation, and evaluation. When establishing the harm reduction vending machines, RCHD analyzed fatal overdose data to identify hotspots within Ross County and noticed a correlation between overdose fatalities and multiple public library locations. The hotspot data helped to inform decisions about where to place the harm reduction vending machines and continues to be used by RCHD to inform where they should focus ongoing overdose prevention efforts. They are also working to ensure that the PORT program is collecting the appropriate level of data needed to inform ongoing program evaluation, such as whether they are conducting sufficient follow-up visits and follow-up support.

## Costs and Staffing

RCHD employs three full-time staff to work on overdose prevention, and they also collaborate with partner organizations to share staffing and funding across multiple projects. For the PORT

program, all participating organizations cover staff time for their respective representatives and all peers are employed by RCCA. Partner organizations have prioritized the PORT program and are committed to providing staff at least once a week. RCHD funding for the PORT program comes from a federal grant that is shared between RCHD and the Adena Health System (AHS).

AHS is a key funding partner of RCHD. The harm reduction vending machines were purchased using federal grant funds awarded to the Hope Partnership Project. Most of the supplies for the vending machine are purchased by AHS using separate federal grant funding while RCHD provides naloxone obtained free of charge from the state health department for the vending machines and other programming. In order to keep receiving supplies at no cost, RCHD is required to send monthly distribution data to the state.

## Barriers

**Substance Use-Related Stigma:** The harm reduction vending machines have been mostly well received by the community, however RCHD has fielded some concerns about machine placement and has also observed that one vending machine has not been utilized. Based on data and conversations with partners, RCHD believes the lower utilization of this vending machine is due to stigma rather than lack of need and they are working on relocating the vending machine to a more private space nearby. Recognizing that stigma has a direct impact on access to services, RCHD is working to address this issue by elevating and incorporating the voices and experiences of individuals with lived experience during community outreach and events.

### Lack of Public Transportation Services:

As with so many rural jurisdictions, the lack of public transportation services in Ross County is a significant barrier to comprehensive overdose prevention. RCHD has tried to mitigate the issue by making naloxone widely and easily available throughout the community via several mechanisms including mail order, naloxboxes, vending machines, and provider access. They are also working with a local pharmacy to establish virtual MAT/MOUD services.

## Facilitators

### Committed Community Partners and Champions:

Ross County benefits from strong partnerships and advocacy efforts that drive the success of local overdose prevention programs. Public library partnership has been integral to the public health vending machine program, and the local branches remain committed to hosting the machines and working to dispel community stigma surrounding their use. Community champions have also played a key role in garnering support for implementation of overdose prevention initiatives. In particular, a well-known physician has used his expertise and strong community influence to increase acceptance of overdose prevention efforts and reduce stigma and a county commissioner with a specific interest in overdose prevention also wields his influence to build support in critical decision-making spaces.

**Naloxone Saturation:** RCHD's comprehensive approach to expanding naloxone access through various mechanisms means that individuals can now access naloxone from almost anywhere in Ross County. They have leveraged key partnerships to increase their reach to people at risk of experi-



encing or witnessing overdose, while non-interaction based access points, such as vending machines and mail order, allows community members to access naloxone in a way that is most comfortable to them.

## Sustainability

While RCHD is primarily funded by federal grants, having strong support from state and local decisionmakers has helped sustain overdose prevention work. At the state level, the governor of Ohio has implemented legislation that requires hospitals to track nonfatal overdoses. This data is available to LHDs through a database that allows them to deepen their understanding of the local overdose landscape and make stronger, data-informed programming decisions. On the local level, one of the county commissioners on the executive board is a strong champion and works with RCHD to promote and destigmatize their OEND work. The strong top-down support and buy-in from state and local decision makers and allies has helped sustain and grow overdose prevention efforts in Ross County.

## References

<sup>1</sup>Overdose Fatalities: WONDER

Population: Census, Annual Estimates of the Resident

Population for Counties: April 1, 2020 to July 1, 2023  
(CO-EST2023-POP)

Square Mileage: Census, Annual Geographic Table

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