

Independence Blue Cross Foundation

Supporting Treatment and Overdose Prevention (STOP) Initiative

Background

Every day in the United States, more than 130 people die as a result of an opioid overdose.ⁱ In 2017, approximately 11.4 million people, 4.9 percent of the total population, misused opioids.ⁱⁱ Nearly 2.1 million Americans are identified as having Opioid Use Disorder (OUD),ⁱⁱⁱ which is characterized by a physical and psychological dependence on opioids.^{iv} An estimated 10 percent of patients prescribed opioids develop an OUD.^v Although drug overdose deaths decreased in the United States in 2018 compared to 2017 (5.1 percent nationally and 19.6 percent in Pennsylvania), OUD prevalence continues to be a critical public health issue.^{vi}

In the southeast Pennsylvania service region of Independence Health Group (Independence) and the Independence Blue Cross Foundation (Foundation), rates of drug overdose deaths have resulted in 6,877 lives lost since 2015. Overdose rates have been steadily increasing since 2015 with a minor reduction in 2018.^{vii} In Philadelphia alone annual overdose rates have more than tripled from 311 to 1,116 since 2003.^{viii} Among Pennsylvania's 67 counties, Philadelphia (#1), Delaware County (#3), Bucks County (#4), Montgomery County (#5), and Chester County (#7) rank in the top 10 for number of drug overdose deaths.^{ix} Data supports the tragic and increasingly common stories of suffering and suggests an even greater urgency for policymakers, providers, and payers to better understand and begin to solve the opioid epidemic in the southeast Pennsylvania region to continue the trend of recent reductions in overdose rates.

Independence and the Foundation recognize the urgent need to address the opioid epidemic in the southeast region of Pennsylvania and are working collaboratively across public and private sectors. Since 2011, the Foundation has invested more than \$35 million in strategic partnerships in nursing and community health to achieve a shared mission of improving the health and well-being of communities. Through its Supporting Treatment and Overdose Prevention (STOP) initiative, the Foundation is allocating additional resources and advancing evidence-based research to achieve scalable impact and replication of solutions to prevent and treat OUD. STOP is increasing awareness of the public health crisis facing the community and improving access to opioid misuse prevention and treatment through strategic grant-making and cross-sector partnerships. Together, with regional partners and national experts in health and policy, the Foundation aims to break the cycle of the opioid epidemic.

Strategic Priorities

Leveraging Cross-Sector Collaboration

Emergency Room Warm Hand-off

Addressing the Stigma of Opioid Use Disorder

Someone You Know Campaign and Conference

Prevention

Prescription Drug Take-back

Enabling Community Partners

Supporting Nonprofits

Empowering Providers

Nurse Engagement and Education

Leveraging Cross-Sector Collaboration

Emergency Room Warm Hand-off

In response to a 2016 state-wide mandate, the 67 counties in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania are required to stand up emergency room-based warm hand-off programs, which use the emergency room setting to provide a drug overdose survivor with an immediate referral to treatment. However, county implementation is in various stages: operational, transitional, and no protocol in place. Within the southeast region of Pennsylvania, Montgomery, Delaware, and Chester counties have initiated warm hand-off programs. In Philadelphia county, warm hand-off programs are being led by individual hospital systems. In Bucks County, the Bucks-County Connect-Assess-Refer-Engage-Support (B-CARES) Program is a county-wide collaborative partnership and care-coordination model that enables emergency room physicians to connect an overdose survivor with a certified recovery specialist who can match an individual with treatment options at a point when s/he is likely most receptive.

The Foundation initiated a study to understand utilization, design, and effectiveness of the B-CARES program. Even among Bucks County hospitals, there is a variation in process and success rates. After reviewing practices across the hospitals participating in the B-CARES program, the Foundation found the following to be best practice recommendations for warm hand-off programs:

- Increase access to Certified Recovery Specialists
- More training for emergency room staff to improve care coordination and reduce stigma
- Use of electronic health record systems to make access to treatment more efficient
- Promote, through government grants, the conversion and co-location of treatment facilities onsite at hospitals where possible
- Empower Emergency Medical Services personnel in facilitating the treatment process

Through public-private collaboration, the Foundation worked with the Bucks County Drug and Alcohol Commission and the Pennsylvania Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs to secure an additional \$650,000 for Bucks County to implement some of the best practice recommendations in 2019. The Foundation has commissioned a second evaluation to examine the best practices implementation and subsequent outcomes.

Addressing the Stigma of Opioid Use Disorder

Someone You Know Campaign and Conference

Stigma is universally recognized as a barrier to individuals and families seeking help. Sharing positive stories of people affected by substance use disorder is an effective strategy for addressing social stigma. Within health care systems, an effective approach to reducing stigma is training and education programs for medical students and professionals.

Through STOP and in partnership with the Pennsylvania Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs and the Pennsylvania State University, the Foundation launched *Someone You Know*, a regional multimedia public awareness campaign that humanizes the disease of opioid use disorder to remove stigma as a barrier to recovery. By sharing inspiring and real stories of individuals affected by opioid use disorder and convening regional community forums and a traveling public exhibit, the Foundation is helping to remove stigma and raise awareness of local treatment resources. The Foundation is working with experts in education and medicine to reduce stigma among clinical professionals. In 2019, to advance the goal of reducing stigma, the *Someone You Know* campaign expanded the number of ambassadors to include nearly two dozen diverse stories and launched the *Someone You Know Podcast*: a series of conversations that explore the pain of addiction and the joys of a life in recovery.

To further its efforts, the Foundation convened *Someone You Know: Facing the Opioid Crisis Together*, a national conference to improve the health of individuals and communities affected by the opioid epidemic. Joined by public health and civic leaders to explore education, intervention, treatment, and the stigma associated with substance use disorder and other barriers to recovery. The Foundation also engaged state and Federal legislators to highlight the barrier of stigma at events convened in Washington DC, Harrisburg, and Philadelphia.

Prevention

Prescription Drug Take-back

Drug take-back programs are an effective primary prevention strategy that reduces the availability of unused and expired prescription drugs in households, a well-known source for opiate abuse initiation. A recent study found that the likelihood of individuals overdosing increased by almost three times when a family member has been previously dispensed opioids.^x Over 50 percent of individuals gain access to opioids from people they know,^{xi} which includes taking prescription drugs from medicine cabinets.

Availability, awareness, and accessibility are critical to the continued success of prescription drug take-back programs. The Foundation STOP initiative supports Pennsylvania Drug and Alcohol Programs efforts by bringing public attention to the availability and accessibility of drug take-back sites in the southeast region. Using ongoing social media promotion and prominent ad placement leading up to National Drug Take-Back Day events, since 2017, the STOP Drug Take-Back campaign has raised public awareness of the increasing number of drug take-back locations in southeast Pennsylvania. Regionally, the amount of prescriptions collected in October 2018 doubled from the prior year.^{xii}

Drug take-back sites in the southeast Pennsylvania region account for 24.9 percent of locations across the Commonwealth (878). Through the STOP initiative, the Foundation has increased availability and accessibility to drug take-back locations through a local partnership with Walgreens, a national pharmacy.

Enabling Community Partners

Supporting Nonprofits

The Foundation STOP Initiative aims to make resources available to those impacted by OUD by awarding grant funding to national and local nonprofits that provide community-based treatment and prevention programs in the southeast Pennsylvania region. Through its Blue Safety Net program, the Foundation has invested more than \$20 million in nearly 50 private, nonprofit health centers that provide affordable access to quality primary care to underserved communities in the southeast Pennsylvania region. Many offer substance

use disorder screening, medication assisted treatment, and support. Among the STOP funded programs is The Moyer Foundation's Camp Mariposa and Community Camp Mariposa, an addiction prevention and mentoring program for children affected by a family member's substance use disorder. The Foundation is also partnering with Caron Treatment Centers and experts in OUD to bridge gaps in care coordination, build treatment capacity, and enhance education in the community. This includes a focus on screening and intervention tools in schools, better educating school-based professionals, and supporting parents with the resources they need. In total, more than \$1,000,000 in grant funding has been awarded by the Foundation through the STOP initiative.

Empowering Providers

Nurse Engagement and Education

Nurses are on the front lines of care, at the bedside and in the community. The Foundation is empowering nurses by increasing their knowledge of opioid dependency to ensure they can provide the best care possible to patients and families in greatest need. Through its Nurses for Tomorrow program, the Foundation has invested nearly \$10 million in the education of nurses pursuing undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral degrees at regional nursing schools. As an effective convener and leader in nursing, the Foundation hosted workshops for its nursing partners, provided continuing education, and commissioned nurse-focused research to improve clinical engagement and disseminate best practices.

References

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