

An Opioid Overdose Response Program at Washington County, NY

What's the Risk?

Substance misuse in the workplace negatively impacts safety and employee wellbeing. About [59% of adults](#) with a substance use disorder are currently in the workforce. Additionally, drug overdose is a [leading cause](#) of death in the United States, with opioids driving a majority of these fatalities. [Workplace overdose deaths](#) have increased by more than 600% since 2011, and overdoses now cause nearly 10% of all worker deaths on the job. On average, the highest rates of unintentional overdose deaths occur in the construction, manufacturing and utilities industries.

Washington County, NY, has seen the uptick in overdose fatalities within their community, inspiring them to take both internal and external action to support overdose prevention and response. As the prevalence of substance misuse and particularly opioid misuse has risen, Washington County leadership found it crucial for all employees across departments to become aware of the signs of an opioid overdose and how to respond to these emergencies effectively.

Implementation of an Opioid Overdose Response Program at Washington County

While Washington County manages programs to support overdose response efforts in the community, the team also created an internal initiative to ensure all staff have the tools they need to respond to an opioid overdose, both on and off the job, should they feel comfortable. To better prepare staff for an overdose emergency and help improve worker safety, Washington County implemented an [opioid overdose response program](#) in 2022. The program supports access to naloxone, an opioid overdose reversal medication that can combat the life-threatening effects of an opioid overdose, and provides training and resources to employees. The primary program components include:

1. Access

Washington County prioritized ensuring naloxone was made readily available to first responders located within their facilities as well as in centralized locations in which anyone with training could respond in case of emergency.

2. Training

Training, while not mandatory, is provided to all staff who are interested in participating. Internal trainers provide the naloxone training every other month or as needed. This training is complemented by related safety training, including CPR/AED and Stop the Bleed. To encourage participation, the Safety Officer

reviews the importance of the training during the new employee orientation and shares the steps needed to take the training.

3. Integration

Instead of setting up and maintaining a stand-alone naloxone initiative, the program team decided to integrate the provision and training of naloxone into existing emergency response and first aid programming. This way, it is easily launched and maintained with related programming that's already routine within the organization.

Lessons Learned

Washington County highlighted several lessons learned during the opioid overdose response program implementation and hopes these tips can aid other employers looking to create a program:

- **Addressing stigma is a vital part of an opioid overdose reversal program**

Stigma is a pervasive obstacle that should be considered when incorporating naloxone into safety and health programs. Breaking down barriers by having conversations about the impact of substance misuse and unintentional overdoses can help increase program success.

- **Employees care, and they are willing to step up**

Washington County shared that one of the largest lessons learned is that people genuinely do care, and they want to help others, both on the job and off the job. Brad Harke, the County's safety officer, stated, "If you give people within your organization a chance to obtain the training and knowledge on how they could prevent an overdose, typically people will be willing to help when a situation arises."

- **Training on the signs and symptoms of an opioid overdose is a crucial component**

Although naloxone is a relatively simple medication to use, training is a step that should not be skipped. In addition to reviewing how to administer naloxone, any training provided should include information on the signs and symptoms of an opioid overdose to increase the ability and confidence of employees when responding. Training also provides an opportunity to connect employees to workplace procedures and related benefits. Harke added, "Once people begin to understand what an overdose looks like and how they can help, you gradually begin to see people stepping up to help not only loved ones but people within their community."

Leadership at Washington County have deemed the implementation of the opioid overdose response program successful. They hope to see the program continue to grow and to encourage more people to feel comfortable with not only naloxone but also first aid. The program team believes that the more people who are trained and comfortable, the better chance employees have at helping someone should a situation arise. They hope that by sharing their experience, this will help other organizations to implement similar programs and that safety managers and leadership will be motivated by the desire of employees to help others.

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