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Public Libraries Respond to the Opioid Crisis with Their Communities: Research Findings

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From the Field

Public Libraries Respond to the Opioid Crisis with Their Communities: Research Findings

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Abstract

The nation is experiencing an ongoing opioid epidemic, and communities across the country are feeling the epidemic's impact. Public health and human service organizations, professional associations, and nonprofits continue to implement responses to stem the rising overdose deaths; public libraries, too, are a part of this response. This article is the follow-up to *Public Libraries Respond to the Opioid Crisis in Collaboration with Their Communities: An Introduction* ([Collaborative Librarianship, volume 11, Issue 1, 2019](#)), and identifies, synthesizes, and shares knowledge and resources that will help public libraries and their community partners develop effective strategies to work together to address the opioid epidemic in America. Eight public libraries and their respective community partners participated in this research study, which is based on interviews with library staff, library board members, staff at community partner organizations, and members of the community. This article highlights the findings from the eight case study sites selected to participate in this research and provides an overview of the partnerships formed and the resources and programming developed to meet community needs.

Keywords: libraries, opioids, opioid, community, response, partnership

Introduction

Public libraries are respected local institutions that connect community members to credible, accurate information and services. Libraries offer neutral public spaces open to all, with support from service-oriented staff deeply committed to their communities. As local anchor institutions, libraries are leveraging these assets in

response to the opioid crisis that has gripped the country. Because public libraries are public buildings, including for those who may be in crisis and looking for a safe space, more library staff are finding themselves on the front line of this public health epidemic. High-profile national news stories have featured libraries' responses, such as providing information on addiction, prevention, treatment, and recovery



support or training staff to use the drug naloxone to help reverse overdoses. Together with community partners, public libraries are providing critically needed information and services, organizing education and training events, and supporting prevention and recovery efforts.

With a goal of helping to support public libraries during this crisis, OCLC, a global library cooperative, and the Public Library Association, a division of the American Library Association, sought to identify how public libraries are responding to the opioid crisis locally. This research is made possible through a National Leadership Grant (project number LG-00-18-0298-18) from the Institute of Museum and Library Services. All of the participating case study libraries worked with partners to deliver opioid-related programming and services to the public. This article provides an overview of the eight case study locations, emerging practices of how libraries are responding to the crisis in collaboration with their partners, and perceived impact of the initiatives. It also discusses both the opportunities and the barriers that libraries should consider when deciding how to fulfill their role as a community resource during a public health crisis.

The summary report for this project contains additional details regarding the research methodology, limitations of the research, details of the library response activities, and challenges and successes of the programs.¹

Methods and Research Limitations

To be considered for a case study, a library was required to have implemented opioid response activities in the past six months, worked in conjunction with a partner in the community on the opioid response activities, and be offering opioid response activities directly to the public.

The research sites were selected based on a purposive sampling methodology that included factors such as geographic location, community

size, demographics, and variation in response activities. The rate of uninsured individuals, the opioid prescribing rate, and the number of overdose deaths in the community also were considered. The final list of participating libraries is not representative of all communities, but it is meant to be diverse and provide examples of programs and services that could be adapted by libraries of all sizes to fit local capacity.

Sixty-four semi-structured face-to-face and telephone interviews were conducted across all eight sites during January-June 2019. As with any case study research, these interviewees represent a small number of the potential respondents at their organizations and therefore their experiences cannot be generalized as the experience for the entire organization. While most interviewees were supportive and positive about their experiences and the need for this work, there are likely other individuals at their organizations with differing opinions and experiences.

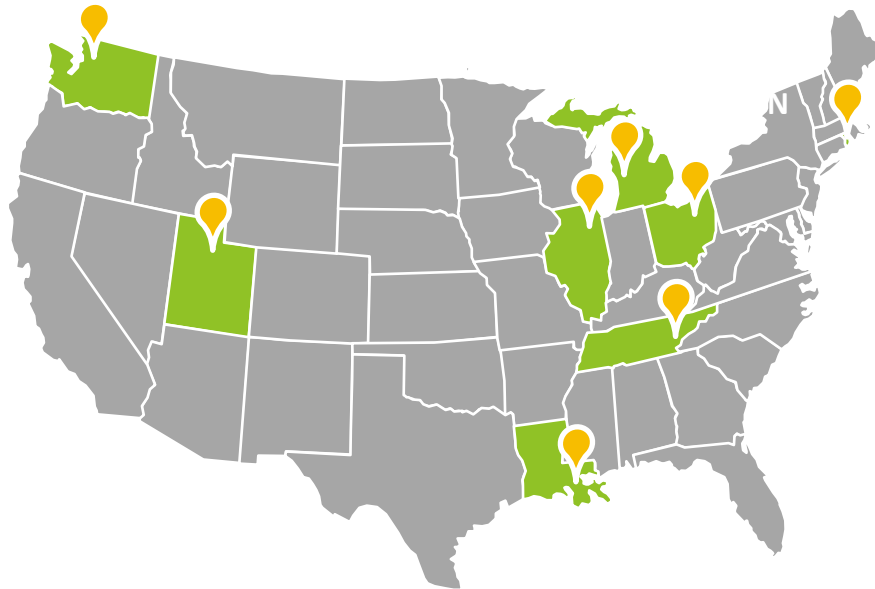
Case Study Sites

Each of the case study libraries, their opioid response activities, and surrounding community demographics are described briefly. The communities served ranged in size from 16,068 to 878,380 people; were rural, urban, and suburban; and were intentionally spread geographically throughout the country (see Figure 1), along with purposely selecting sites that varied in other demographic factors. The same sources were used for the library data,² community demographics and uninsured rate,³ unemployment data,⁴ opioid prescribing rates,⁵ and opioid overdose rates.⁶ For the complete case studies, please visit the project website

<https://www.oclc.org/research/publications/2019/oclcresearch-public-libraries-respond-to-opioid-crisis/supplemental.html>



FIGURE 1. Case study locations



Barrington Public Library, Rhode Island

Barrington Public Library (BPL) serves the small town of Barrington, Rhode Island, which is about a thirty-minute drive from the state's capital, Providence. BPL's one building serves a population of 16,068, has seven librarians, and received 186,819 patron visits last year. The

population is almost entirely White, is highly educated, and has a high median household income of \$117,408. The uninsured rate is very low at 1.9%, and the county has a relatively low retail opioid prescribing rate at 39.7 per 100 people, yet the state of Rhode Island has experienced a 2.5-fold increase in the number of overdose deaths since 2009.⁷

Figure 2. Flyer promoting an “It’s Time We Talk” event. Photo courtesy of Barrington Public Library.



To begin to address this increase, BPL and their partners at Barrington Adult Youth Team (BAY Team), which is the community’s substance abuse coalition, developed programming to address wellness. Prior to planning any

opioid response activities, the BAY Team sought to understand how the opioid prevention activities would be received by the Barrington community through a community needs assessment. They concluded that the community was not yet

ready for a program specifically focused on opioids because of stigma against those who misuse or abuse substances. Instead, the team decided to educate and engage the community through a series called “It’s Time We Talk,” which incorporates substance misuse issues under the umbrella of wellness, and begins to tackle the stigma associated with these issues. BPL offered a robust six-month program of events including, but not limited to, a community discussion of the book, *Dreamland: The True Tale of America’s Opiate Epidemic* (Quinones, 2015), a study night for teens, Mental Health First Aid Training to teach the skills to respond to the signs of mental illness and substance use in youth, film screenings related to substance use disorders and mental health, and naloxone training for the public and BPL staff.

Blount County Public Library, Tennessee

Blount County Public Library (BCPL), located in Blount County, Tennessee, reports approximately 390,000 patron visits annually at their location that serves 128,670 people. The county is comprised of mostly White populations and has similar to national averages of median income, poverty rate, and uninsured rates. It does, however, have a higher than national average opioid prescribing rate at 80.2 per 100 people.

BCPL is working to address the opioid crisis in its community by partnering with the local Recovery Court to provide Life Skills Curriculum to Recovery Court participants. Recovery Court is an alternative sentencing program offered to nonviolent offenders with a history of drug and alcohol abuse with the goal of lowering habitual criminal activity. The library collaborated with Recovery Court to develop the curriculum program to teach participants the skills necessary to succeed in their lives and in the community. Participants attend a regular schedule of classes at the library, with each two-hour session combining education and counseling into a single meeting. The curriculum covers communication,

finance, social health, physical health, nutrition, personal appearance, and career development.

BCPL and Recovery Court program staff also conduct outreach to key service organizations and community stakeholders who are addressing recovery and addiction education. This outreach allows staff to continue to build community connections and support for participants while also reducing stigma participants in this program might feel. Recovery Court participants often will speak at schools or at local events to share their experiences with the program and increase community awareness.

Everett Public Library, Washington

Everett Public Library (EPL) is located in Snohomish County, Washington State, about 30 minutes north of Seattle. The two library locations serve 109,800 patrons, seeing about a half million visits per year. Everett has approximately two-thirds White populations, 15% Hispanic or Latino populations, and 9% Asian populations. It also has close to national averages for median household income, uninsured rate, poverty rate, and opioid prescribing rates. In 2016, Snohomish County represented approximately one out of every six heroin deaths in Washington state. As a result, the county declared the opioid crisis a life-threatening emergency and activated the emergency management system.⁸ The Snohomish County Health District estimated 5,000 to 10,000 people in the county have opioid use disorder and that another 35,000 to 80,000 people are misusing opioids.⁹

In response, EPL was one of the first library systems in Washington state to offer optional naloxone training to its staff, in partnership with the Snohomish County Human Services Department’s Behavioral Health Division. At least one patron was successfully revived from an overdose as a result of this training. The library holds monthly resource days where local service organizations offer information to community



members about social services such as housing, health care, employment, and substance abuse treatment. EPL hosted community events highlighting books related to the opioid crisis (e.g., *American Fix: Inside the Opioid Addiction Crisis - and How to End It*, by opioid survivor Ryan Hampton, 2018) and author speaking events focused on substance use as part of the Everett

Reads! community-wide reading program (e.g., *Beautiful Boy: A Father's Journey Through His Son's Addiction* by David Sheff, 2008). EPL has added sharps containers for needle disposal on-site, made the bathroom stall height shorter so security could more easily see in if there was a problem, and added windows to the main doors to the bathrooms to increase visibility for safety.

Figure 3. Author, David Sheff at a library event. Photo courtesy of Everett Public Library.



Kalamazoo Public Library, Michigan

Kalamazoo Public Library (KPL) serves 116,445 patrons in Kalamazoo, Michigan via its one central and four branch locations, receiving more than 600,000 visits per year. The community is comprised of approximately 70% White populations, 20% Black or African American populations, and 7% Hispanic or Latino populations. The community has a median household income that is less than the national average at \$40,749

and a higher than national average poverty rate at 26%. It does, however, have a comparable to national average uninsured rate and opioid prescribing rate.

To begin to address the rising opioid crisis in their community, KPL partnered with the Recovery Institute of Southwest Michigan, which provides peer navigators to the library. These peer navigators offer support and social service navigation for patrons experiencing substance

use disorder, homelessness, or other challenges. The Recovery Institute peer navigators work on-site at the library and serve as a resource to help the public, just like other library staff. The navigators connect patrons to recovery and other community services and offer direct support. Awareness of the program is generated through word-of-mouth and by making contact in-person when peer navigators walk around in the library and introduce themselves to patrons. Much of the success of KPL's use of the peer navigator program can be attributed to the motivated partnership between KPL and the Recovery Institute. From the start, Recovery Institute staff jumped in to offer their services for free to help get the program up and running.

In addition to the peer navigator program, library staff have the option to become trained in the administration of naloxone, the opioid overdose antidote, and there are sharps containers in the bathrooms to allow for safe needle disposal. Staff also began distributing comfort kits with items such as shampoo, deodorant, and snacks to community members in need.

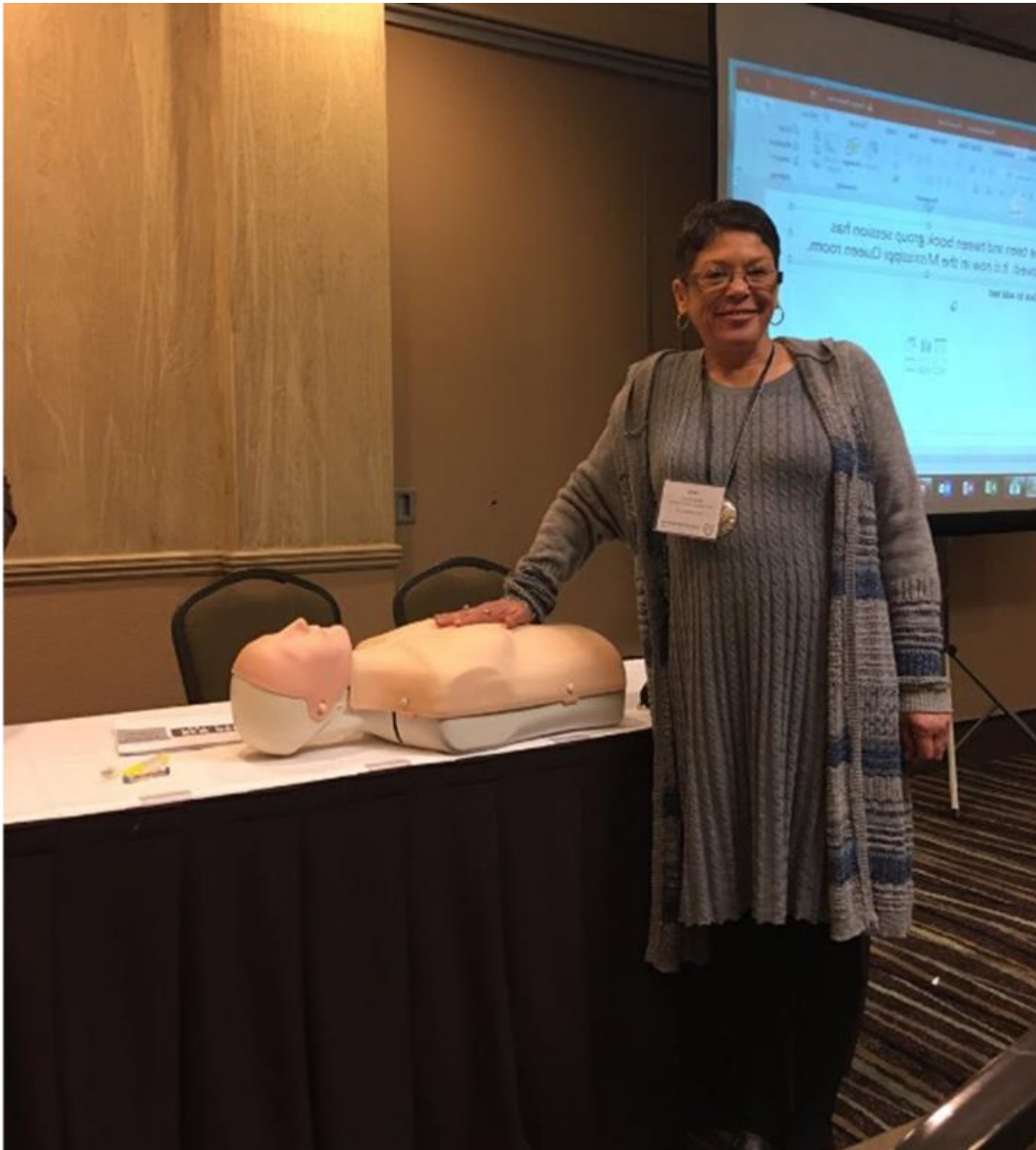
New Orleans Public Library, Louisiana

New Orleans Public Library (NOPL), located in the city of New Orleans, Louisiana, serves a

population size of 393,292 at fifteen locations throughout the city, receiving more than 1.6 million visits per year with 140 librarians and 52 other staff. The city is comprised of 60% Black or African American populations and one third White populations. The city has a lower than national average median household income at \$38,721 and higher than average poverty rate at 25% but has similar to national average uninsured rate and opioid prescribing rates. The number of Orleans Parish general drug overdose deaths was 405 people per 100,000 from 2015 through 2017.

To address the high overdose death rate, NOPL partnered with the New Orleans Health Department (NOHD) to coordinate and offer opioid overdose and prevention training programs both internally to library staff and externally to the public. This Bystander Response Training combines naloxone administration training with information on the opioid crisis, CPR, and Stop the Bleed training throughout the year at various branch locations. NOPL and NOHD work together to coordinate the locations, recruitment, and advertising. To encourage participation in the training events, NOPL and NOHD do not require attendees to provide their real names or full addresses.

Figure 4. New Orleans Public Library staff member preparing to present. Photo courtesy of New Orleans Public Library.



In addition, NOPL and NOHD are also working together to secure funding to install sharps containers in all library restrooms and on the exterior of library buildings. NOHD also has tapped into a federal program called the Medical Reserve Corps (MRC). This is a group of volunteers that support their community during

health emergencies; volunteers sometimes have a public health or medical background, but often simply want to address public health concerns. The MRC has helped the health department in New Orleans expand its reach and capacity, including through this partnership with NOPL,

where MRC volunteers often serve as the trainers for the Bystander Response Training.

Peoria Public Library, Illinois

Peoria Public Library (PPL) sits in the midwestern town of Peoria, Illinois and serves a population size of 115,007 with one main and four branch locations. The library reports more than 700,000 visits per year. The community is made up of almost two-thirds White populations, one-quarter Black or African American populations, and 5% Asian American populations. The median household income is less than the national average at \$47,697, and the poverty rate is higher than the national average at 21%. The uninsured rate is less than the national average at 7.2%, whereas the opioid prescribing rate is slightly higher than the national average at 69.2 per 100 people.

PPL worked as a member of their Mayor's Community Coalition Against Heroin to bring Sam Quinones, author of *Dreamland*, a book that chronicles America's opioid epidemic, to provide a variety of community engagement events including a book discussion and author visits with local public schools, elected officials, and law enforcement. This book was selected as the focus for the annual One City, One Book project where everyone in the community is encouraged to read the same book, discuss it together, and participate in associated programming. The coalition received money via the city to host the author and purchase 500 books for the library to distribute for free to community members. Leading up to the author's visit, the coalition hosted community forums discussing opioids,

as well as viewings of the film, *Chasing the Dragon: The Life of an Opiate Addict* (2016), which focuses on the dangers of substance use disorder.

Following the author's visit, PPL decided to expand their efforts and received funding from Illinois Humanities to host four community discussions on heroin and opiates at different library locations. In addition, Bradley University's Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, which provides continuing education for people older than fifty, contacted PPL to inquire about offering a course addressing heroin and opiates. The library worked in partnership with the Institute to develop the curriculum, which resulted in a six-week, twelve-hour course where different community leaders presented on topics at each class. PPL also has provided naloxone training to their staff.

Salt Lake County Library, Utah

Salt Lake County Library (SLCL) operates with eighteen branch locations and one event center in Salt Lake County, Utah. It serves a population size of 878,380, with 113 librarians and 285.5 other staff, receiving more than 3.5 million visits per year. The county is made up of 80% White populations and 18% Hispanic or Latino populations. The county has a higher median household income than the national average at \$67,922 and a lower than national average poverty rate at 10.4%. From 2015 through 2017 there were 817 drug overdoses per 100,000 people. In 2015, more than 2.6 million opioid prescriptions were dispensed in Utah, which is the equivalent of almost one prescription per Utahn.¹⁰

Figure 5. Use Only as Directed pill bottle display. Photo courtesy of Salt Lake County Library.



SLCL has conducted three key initiatives to respond to the opioid crisis. First, they partnered with the county health department, Intermountain Healthcare, and a local ad agency to implement a marketing campaign at the library titled “Use Only As Directed.” The campaign depicted the magnitude of opioid prescriptions filled each day in Utah by hanging 7,000 paper pill bottles from the ceiling, in addition to other informational displays posted throughout the library. The overarching objectives for the Use Only as Directed campaign were to encourage people to speak to their health care providers about the inherent risks of opioids, discuss alternatives to opioids for pain management, and to learn about proper disposal of leftover opioids.

Second, each branch in the Salt Lake County system is stocked with naloxone kits for staff use, and all staff have the opportunity to become trained in naloxone administration. In addition

to standalone training, the library also has added naloxone training to the optional CPR training already provided to staff. The training includes information on recognizing the signs of an opioid overdose, statistics on who is impacted by the opioid crisis, how to administer naloxone, and information on available substance abuse resources.

Third, SCLC offers naloxone kits to the public for free (provided by their partner, Utah Naloxone) with information on how to administer them. Any patron can walk into the library and request a free naloxone kit, no questions asked. Up to two kits can be picked up per person, per visit. In order for a branch library to be eligible to distribute naloxone, at least one staff person from the branch must attend a naloxone training.

Twinsburg Public Library, Ohio

Twinsburg Public Library (TPL) is located in Twinsburg, Ohio with a service population of 24,453. The library has one central location and has approximately 325,000 visits per year.

Twinsburg has approximately three-quarters White populations, 14% Black or African American populations, and 6% Asian populations. The residents have higher high school diploma and bachelor's degree rates than the national average, a higher median income at \$75,365, a lower poverty rate at 6.7%, and a very low uninsured rate at 2.8%. The general drug overdose death rate for Summit County was 754 per 100,000 people from 2015 through 2017. From 2009 through 2016, there was a 277% increase in the number of yearly overdose-related fatalities.¹¹

Before beginning opioid response activities, TPL conducted an informal community needs survey to understand how to best serve their patrons. The anonymous survey was available in the library, on the library's website, and through Facebook and Instagram. From the responses, the library learned that some of the community needs included recovery support groups and opportunities for counseling. As such, TPL facilitates Self-Management and Recovery Training, a program similar to Alcoholics Anonymous, for individuals seeking support for substance abuse or substance use disorder. The meetings are offered once per month, are anonymous, and sign-up is not required. Any patron dealing with issues related to misuse of substances like alcohol or opioids can attend.

TPL also serves as a Detera® bag distribution site for its community. The Detera® Drug Deactivation System is a drug disposal pouch for unneeded prescription and over-the-counter medications. People can dispose of these medications in a safe and environmentally friendly way in the privacy of their own homes. The library's community partner in this endeavor is Summit

County Community Partnership, which provides the library with the bags for free so any patron can pick them up at no charge. The library also offers educational events for the public on topics of mental illness and substance use disorder.

Partnership Findings

All eight libraries worked closely with a range of partners to implement their opioid response programming, engaging up to three partners at a time. Many of the libraries developed new partnerships to implement the work, but others relied on existing partnerships that strengthened over the course of implementation. The most common partners engaged by the libraries were government agencies, such as the local health department, followed by nonprofit organizations. Libraries found health departments to be ideal partners because they are local public health experts and work directly within the community. For most libraries, health departments were a new partner.

In theory, there are four main types of partnerships that operate on a continuum from networking to coordinating to cooperating to collaborating, as identified by Arthur Himmelman. As the work becomes more complex, the partnership becomes stronger and more tightly linked, moving further along on the continuum.¹² As Figure 6 illustrates, addressing the opioid crisis is a complex social issue and the libraries are engaged in coordinating, cooperating, and collaborating partnerships. Usually, the more advanced the intervention, the stronger the partnership. For example, Blount County Public Library is collaborating in a multiyear effort with the Recovery Court to design and deliver life skills training to program participants. Other library partnerships are more focused on coordinating efforts, such as those that partnered to offer naloxone training.

FIGURE 6. Case Study Partnership Types



Table 1. Types of Partnerships

<p>Networking: provides a forum for the exchange of ideas and information for mutual benefit, often through newsletters, conferences, meetings, and electronic information sharing.</p>
<p>Coordinating: involves exchanging information and altering activities for a common purpose.</p>
<p>Cooperating: involves exchanging information, altering activities, and sharing resources. It requires a significant amount of time, high level of trust, and sharing of turf.</p>
<p>Collaborating: includes enhancing the capacity of the other partner for mutual benefit and a common purpose, in addition to the above activities.</p>

In almost all cases, the library initiated the partnership and outreach. To develop these partnerships, some libraries relied on personal relationships they had from previous work and others used the credibility of the library institution as leverage to form new partnerships. A few libraries had staff dedicated to community outreach, while others relied on existing library and partner staff to develop the collaboration over time. For the majority of community partners, this was the first time that they had worked with their local library.

Staff at these community partner organizations said that the mission of the library as a public space for everyone that shares information and resources made them ideal partners. Moreover, the libraries have a broad reach into the community that partners often do not have; this includes promotional marketing and communications to advertise the programming. The library also can provide physical space to host events or activities that are free of stigma, safe, and easily accessible to the public, something that not all

partners have access to. Many of the partners indicated that they did not originally consider the library as a potential partner for this community crisis, but after having worked with the library, all partners stated they would do so again. One community partner frontline staff member articulated this sentiment:

“It’s turned out to be a great partnership, in terms of logistics and in terms of support. The library and their staff have gone out of the way to sort of spread the word in ways that we wouldn’t have access to, like getting it on the events pages, flyers at the library, and the magazines. And then the physical space actually has been very useful because the libraries are somewhere that is publicly accessible and publicly comfortable for people to show up and not feel like they’re being funneled into some government agency.”

At least half of the libraries were involved in some variation of a community coalition seeking to address substance misuse and the opioid crisis. Often these coalitions informed the library’s opioid response activities. The coalitions allowed the libraries to capitalize on resources and capacities already available in the community and increase their reach. Moreover, the credibility of the organizations involved in these coalitions, such as mayors, elected officials, and trusted community organizations and nonprofits granted the library the political support needed for funding and community acceptance.

Perceived Impact

Libraries reported many successes as a result of their opioid response activities. It is important to note, however, that program impacts and outcomes have not been formally evaluated. There are many reasons for this, including that these libraries only have recently begun their work and have not set up a tracking system and/or because the library does not have the budget or expertise for a formal evaluation. However, the

most common barrier reported was concern that collecting personal data might discourage participants from accessing programming due to the sensitive nature of the issue.

Interviewees were able to cite perceived impact and outputs from their work that included the following:

- *Increased community resources.* All eight libraries discussed increased availability of community resources as a result of their work, including access to peer navigators, programming events, books, and naloxone kits.
- *Developed new partnerships.* At least six libraries explicitly indicated that engaging in opioid response activities resulted in both strengthening their existing partnerships and developing new partnerships.
- *Received positive feedback from community members.* Numerous stories from library staff, community partner staff, and community members highlight the impact the opioid response activities has had on their lives. A community member in Blount County said this: “...being able to utilize the tools that they gave us versus just winging everything gives you a different level of confidence to take on everyday life.”
- *Reached other libraries and community organizations.* The library’s opioid response work often spread beyond their and their community partners’ walls. This occurred both in other libraries nearby and in other community-based organizations. For example, in Twinsburg, the library and their partner hosted a meeting for surrounding libraries to learn about Detera® bags and as a result, additional libraries have joined the distribution efforts. A community partner in New Orleans also shared: “Our

library has been great about helping not only other libraries around Louisiana, but also other community groups here in New Orleans get connected and feel comfortable with it. I'll go to a community organization and they'll look at me like I'm crazy, but I'll say the library is doing this. Let me show you how they did it."

- *Began to address stigma against substance use disorder.* Interviewees were hopeful that their educational events were working to break down stigma in the community towards those who have substance use disorder, including among library staff. A community partner shared: "It's a very powerful thing to get all those different people and organizations coming in and advocating for a change in attitude and behavior surrounding opioids. And the library is where the rubber meets the road for reaching audiences. They're a gathering center and in a great place to put out social cause messaging that gets the dialogue going."
- *Increased positive perception of the library.* As a result of engaging in often new and diverse opioid response activities, interviewees expressed that they thought community members and organizations viewed the library as more essential to meeting local needs.

Success Factors and Challenges

Library and community partner interviewees were asked to reflect upon what may have contributed to the success of their opioid response activities. The one factor mentioned by all eight libraries was the importance of having champions to promote buy in and to drive the work forward within their library, their partner organization, or both. Most of the time, this work was implemented in addition to normal responsibili-

ties and therefore needed a passionate individual able to overcome obstacles and put forth the additional effort. Usually this person was in a position of leadership within the library. Often there was a champion at the community partner organization as well.

Other success factors included having strong partnerships in the community, political or city support, starting small and letting the work grow naturally, and having an engaged and invested community.

In addition to identifying what contributed to their success, the librarians and their partners identified challenges they worked to overcome. Interviewees at six of the research locations shared how the strong stigma around substance misuse in the community impacted their work. The libraries and their partners feared how patrons with substance use disorder would be perceived by other library patrons, and some library staff shared that some patrons expressed concern that the library may no longer be safe because the new programming served populations with substance use disorder. As a result, some libraries intentionally reframed their work from opioid overdose prevention to wellness with a goal of encouraging more program attendance, and others did not advertise the programming broadly to the public to keep potential pushback to a minimum.

Many of the community partners brought up the need for additional funding to hire more staff to dedicate toward direct program implementation and promotion. There is also an ongoing need to buy more resources like naloxone kits and Detertra® bags to distribute to the public. Library interviewees also mentioned the importance of and need for funding to support programming and guest speakers.

Conclusion

The case study findings highlight the important influences the libraries' responses to their local

opioid crisis had on their community, including increased relevant resources such as naloxone and drug disposal kits made available, a positive impact on individuals' lives, increased community awareness and knowledge about the opioid crisis, decreased stigma surrounding substance use disorder, increased positive perception of the library, and newly formed partnerships and strengthened existing ones.

Library opioid response programming ranges from stocking and training on naloxone administration to providing recovery services to more traditional community education events. Libraries most commonly partnered with local health departments to implement this work, in addition to other city or county agencies, nonprofit organizations, the judicial system, and coalitions focused on community improvements. A key challenge in the response to the opioid crisis was the presence of stigma in the community connected to substance use disorder. Funding to support programs also was raised as a common concern, with particular needs surfacing around

purchasing naloxone, bringing in guest speakers, supporting program evaluation, and marketing events.

The capacity of the staff of both the libraries and their partners is an important consideration for entering into partnerships, and a partnership is not a pre-requisite for supporting community needs around this essential community health crisis. But these responses highlight how libraries are engaging with social justice issues more regularly, expanding beyond their traditional role, and demonstrating their critical role in the community.

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