

# Harm Reduction: What's the FUSS?



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## Abstract

Opioid misuse remains a significant problem in the United States, especially with the addition of Fentanyl. In recent years, North Carolina has seen a rise in overdoses and deaths related to opioid misuse in urban areas and in rural communities where resources are limited. To tackle this issue, communities must implement effective approaches for reducing the negative consequences that are unfortunately associated with opioid use and the opioid crisis. One such way is through a client-centered approach known as harm reduction. This evidence-based modality remains a controversial subject steeped in stigmatization despite its proven efficacy. This poster presentation will provide an overview of harm reduction approaches for opioid use and address the need to combat the stigma associated with harm reduction through a concerted effort to educate communities and bring awareness to the many benefits harm reduction provides. Finally, an advocacy plan will be discussed for dissemination to local and state government to reallocate resources to rural communities that may lack the necessary tools to stem the tide of opioid abuse.

## Abstinence-Based vs. Harm Reduction Programs

- An abstinence-based approach focuses on a complete end to drug use.
- United States policies have long promoted an abstinence-based approach to treatment regarding drug misuse. Proponents of abstinence-only treatment emphasize that lack of success in abstinence-based programs is because clients resist efforts put forth and lack the willpower to be treated (Lee & O'Malley, 2018).
- Programs like opioid agonist therapy commonly referred to as medication assisted treatment are seen as perpetuating drug use. They rarely are acknowledged as providing services that meet the individual suffering from substance use disorder where they are (Allen et al., 2019).
- Harm reduction encapsulates a set of principles and intervention strategies that harness the individual's abilities, motivation, and the notion they can act in their best interest (Jenkins et al, 2017).
- Harm reduction approaches work in a holistic manner to meet the client where they are on the drug continuum without judgement. (Lee & O'Malley, 2018).
- Harm reduction programs focus on the reduction of harm caused by engaging in negative behaviors associated with drug misuse.
- In addition to combating maladaptive activities, harm reduction approaches provide a means to lower the transmission of diseases like hepatitis C and HIV through promoting healthy practices by people who inject drugs (Allen et al., 2019).



## Reality of opioid epidemic

- According to the National Center for Health Statistics (2020) over 75% of drug overdoses deaths in the United States from April 2019 to March 2020 were caused by opioids.
- Over that same time period, North Carolina stood at 80% drug overdoses deaths related to opioid misuse (NCHS, 2020).
- Of these deaths, nearly three-fourths involved the use of synthetic opioids like fentanyl (NCHS, 2020).
- Close to 80 residents per 100,000 in NC were seen in hospital emergency rooms stemming from overdose related symptoms in 2020 (NC Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.).



## What are Harm Reduction Approaches

- Medicated Assisted Treatment Facilities:**
  - Methadone & Buprenorphine access to reduce craving and withdrawal issues.
- Syringe Exchange Programs:**
  - Sterile syringe access to lower risk of HIV and hepatitis C spread.
- Supervised Consumption Services/Supervised Injection facilities:**
  - Allows sanctioned on-site drug consumption to reduce public health issues.
- Naloxone (NARCAN) Access:**
  - Quick acting non-psychoactive drug that reverses an opioid overdose, to reduce ER saturation and death.
- Fentanyl Test strips:**
  - Test strips to determine if illicit drug contains fentanyl.
- Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD):**
  - Diverts individuals picked up on minor drug offenses into community-based support services, rather than incarcerating them.



(Goldman et al., 2019; Nadelmann & LaSalle, 2017)

## Stigmatization

- HR promotes drug use by removing one drug and replacing it with another.
- Individuals in MAT programs are not really in recovery.
- HR promotes easy and safe access to drugs without consequences.
- HR advocates for law enforcement to look the other way when it comes to drug abuse.

(Des Jarlais, 2017)



## Reality

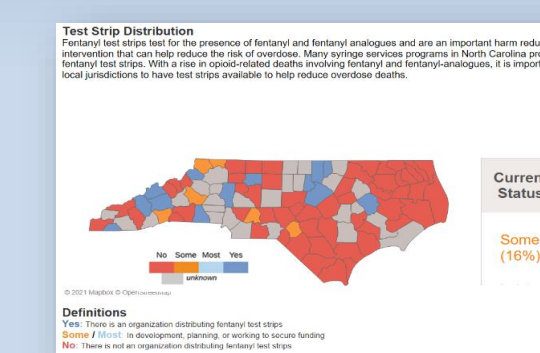
2019-2020 Stats for NC:

- 50% decrease in HIV and hepatitis C infections.
- Over 8,600 overdose reversals.
- Over 62,000 contacts made allowing for over 2,700 referrals to treatment facilities.
- Each dollar in support of HR, saves over \$2,500 pp in cost related to overdose deaths.

(Naumann et al., 2019; NC Department of Health and Human Services, 2020)

## Lack of Resources in Rural NC

- NC has 100 counties, 80 of which are considered rural according to NC Rural Center ((NC Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.)
- In 2019, NC was one of only five states where overdose death rates in rural counties outpaced overdose death rates in urban counties (NCHS, 2021).
- 34% of NC has syringe exchange access.
- 40% of NC has some type of Narcan access.
- 16% of NC has test strip distribution
- 18% of NC has community response programs.
- No supervised consumption services.



(NC Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.)

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## Advocacy Plan

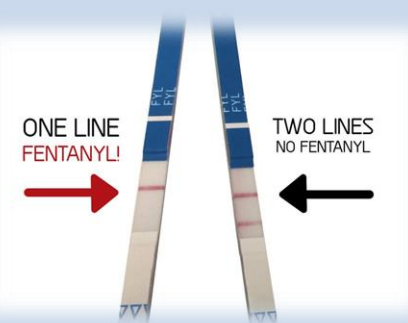
**Issue:** Harm Reduction expansion in NC

**Goal:** Increase awareness of harm reduction platform through education of local community leaders.

**Action:** Advocate for increased state funding for programs that promote harm reduction approaches in order to facilitate buy-in from community stakeholders.

### Advocacy Ideas:

- Reduce stigma around HR through educational programs in local outreach programs.
- Call local Law Enforcement Agencies about LEAD program and advocate for local jurisdictions to request increase NARCAN supplies through coordination with NC harm reduction coalition.
- Call local media outlets about creating PSAs to highlight benefit of HR programs.
- Contact local and state officials about initiating and supporting a bill to establish supervised consumption and injection facilities on a state and federal level.
- Lobby for increased funding to smaller rural communities to increase the distribution of fentanyl test strips.
- Educate community leaders on the Good Samaritan Law, how it works and who it protects.



## Conclusion

Harm reduction is a multi-pronged approach to dealing with the opioid crisis ravishing our country. Current literature supports the effectiveness surrounding the implementation of harm reduction as a person-centered method to decrease negative outcomes related to opioid misuse. For years harm reduction has been passed over in-lieu of an approach that fail to account for individual's readiness for change. Harm reduction empowers individuals to change at a pace that is conducive for their wellbeing and incorporates a holistic view of the individual. Unfortunately, harm reduction programs are underfunding throughout the United States and especially in rural areas where these programs are much needed. Through a concerted effort of advocacy work regarding action planning, resource sharing, and education, harm reduction programs can assist in reducing the terrible effects opioid misuse is having on our nation.

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