



CITY OF PHILADELPHIA
Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disAbility Services
Promoting Recovery, Resilience & Self Determination

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Policy & Practice Brief: Harm Reduction Interventions for Substance Use Disorders

What are harm reduction interventions?

Substance use disorder (SUD) is often chronic and relapsing in nature. This can make it difficult and impractical to treat to sustained abstinence.ⁱ Instead of prioritizing abstinence as a desired outcome, *harm reduction interventions* seek to *lessen* problematic consequences of SUD.ⁱⁱ For example, harm reduction interventions may seek to prevent or reverse drug overdoses; to prevent the spread of blood-borne infections (e.g., HIV, Hepatitis C) related to injection drug use; to lessen the frequency of use; or to ensure that individuals have access to important resources despite their use (e.g., housing).

Importantly, harm reduction interventions respect the *autonomy* of the individual who is using. Harm reduction interventions consider an individual's *motivation and ability to change*, and collaboration between treatment professionals and clients is key to developing reasonable intervention goals. Collectively, harm reduction interventions recognize several key principles:

- SUD is a public health concern.
- Abstinence can be a desired—and perhaps the ideal—outcome of intervention, but any outcome that reduces the harm of substance use is supported and encouraged.
- Instead of being imposed from on high, interventions are created through grassroots initiatives and with input from individuals who are using.
- Low-barrier access to interventions is essential (e.g., access to interventions should not be contingent on certain preconditions or outcomes).ⁱⁱⁱ

Common examples of harm reduction interventions for SUD include:

Intervention	Key Outcomes
Syringe Exchange Programs	Reduce transmission of blood-borne infections
Sharps Disposal Programs	Reduce transmission of blood-borne infections
Naloxone (Narcan) Distribution	Reverse drug overdose
Fentanyl Test Strip Distribution	Prevent drug overdose
Overdose Prevention Sites/ Safe Consumption Sites	Prevent/reverse drug overdose, increase connections to treatment
Medication-Assisted Treatment (e.g., buprenorphine, methadone, naltrexone)	Reduction of cravings/use

Police/Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion	Reduction of use, connection to treatment and case management, recidivism reduction
Housing First Model	Low-barrier housing (e.g., not dependent on abstinence)

Are harm reduction interventions evidence-based?

A strong research base—in the United States and abroad—supports the use of harm reduction interventions to lessen negative consequences of SUD. Highlights of these research findings are presented below:

- Syringe exchange programs are effective at reducing transmission of HIV among injection drug users.^{iv}
- Naloxone distribution is a cost-effective^v way to safely reduce overdose death rates.^{vi}
- Studies of distribution of fentanyl test strips suggest individuals will test drugs before using and are more likely to adopt risk-reducing behaviors (such as using a lesser amount than intended or using in the presence of others as opposed to alone).^{vii}
- Overdose prevention centers reduce overdose deaths and reduce negative consequences of use. Additionally, overdose prevention centers help increase treatment engagement. Research does not suggest that overdose prevention centers increase drug selling, increase novel use of drugs, or trigger relapse among individuals in recovery.^{viii}
- Medication-assisted treatment (MAT) reduces opioid use, as well as increases likelihood that individuals will stay in treatment.^{ix}
- Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion programs reduce recidivism, as well as increase employment and housing stability among participants.^x
- Housing First programs decrease homelessness and increase housing stability for individuals experiencing behavioral health challenges. They also reduce criminal justice involvement for individuals experiencing behavioral health challenges. Additionally, they may help reduce psychiatric symptoms, reduce substance use, and improve quality of life, though evidence regarding these outcomes is mixed.^{xi}

Is Philadelphia utilizing harm reduction interventions?

Yes! Some notable harm reduction interventions currently being used in Philadelphia are described in the table below (this list is not exhaustive):

Intervention	Brief Description
Narcan Availability	The Philadelphia Department of Public Health (PDPH) operates a Narcan Near Me Tower at the Lucien E. Blackwell West Philadelphia Regional Library. The Commonwealth has a standing order to allow Narcan to be provided to individuals over the counter, with a key component of the order being that PDPH receives a set number of Narcan doses every year that it can distribute to the community. DBHIDS provides training to individuals on how to recognize overdose signs and properly administer Narcan, as well as distributes Narcan to the community. Additionally, NEXTDistro also provides information on how citizens can obtain free and pharmacy-based naloxone (Narcan). Further, recovery houses in Philadelphia host NaloxBoxes to allow for easy access to Narcan.

Syringe Exchange	Prevention Point Philadelphia operates one of the largest syringe exchange programs in North America. Syringes can be exchanged at Prevention Point's main location in Kensington. Prevention Point also operates a mobile syringe exchange program.
Fentanyl Detection and Education	PDPH can provide fentanyl test strips to providers upon request. Fentanyl test strips allow individuals to test drugs for contamination with fentanyl. As of 2022, under Pennsylvania law, fentanyl test strips are no longer considered to be drug paraphernalia. The City of Philadelphia has also launched a public awareness campaign regarding the prevalence of fentanyl in drugs in 2021.
Project Reach	Project Reach is a harm reduction-based sanitation program that focuses on providing environmental services in communities that have been impacted by substance use and provides hazmat services focused on human waste and drug-related clean-up.
Police Assisted Diversion	Police Assisted Diversion (PAD) diverts low-level, non-violent offenders away from the criminal justice system and into treatment and other support resources. PAD is currently operating in all East Division police districts (24, 25, 26).
Safe Havens	Safe Havens utilize a harm reduction approach in residential settings for individuals experiencing significant behavioral health challenges and homelessness. They link individuals to available housing subsidies, support individuals in their housing process/housing units, and ensure the individual is connected to social service supports to help sustain their housing.

Additional Reading

- City of Philadelphia
 - <https://www.phila.gov/programs/combating-the-opioid-epidemic/harm-reduction/>
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
 - <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/harm-reduction>
- National Harm Reduction Coalition
 - <https://harmreduction.org/about-us/principles-of-harm-reduction/>

ⁱ Volkow, N. D. (2022, January 3). *Making addiction treatment more realistic and pragmatic: The perfect should not be the enemy of the good*. Health Affairs. <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/forefront.20211221.691862>

ⁱⁱ Tatarsky, A. & Marlatt, G. A. (2010). State of the art in harm reduction psychotherapy: An emerging treatment for substance misuse. *Journal of Clinical Psychology: In Session*, 66(2), 117-122.

ⁱⁱⁱ Marlatt, G. A. (1996). Harm reduction: Come as you are. *Addictive Behaviors*, 21(6), 779-788.

^{iv} See, e.g., Fernandes, R. M., Cary, M., Duarte, G., Jesus, G., Alarcao, J., Torre, C., Costa, S., Costa, J., & Vaz Carneiro, A. (2017). Effectiveness of needle and syringe programmes in people who inject drugs: An overview of systematic reviews. *BMC Public Health*, 17, 309. doi: 10.1186/s12889-017-4210-2

^v See, e.g., Cherrier, N., Kearon, J., Tetreault, R., Garasia, S., & Guindon, E. (2022). Community distribution of naloxone: A systematic review of economic evaluations. *PharmacoEconomics – Open*, 6, 329-342.

^{vi} See, e.g., McDonald, R. & Strang, J. (2016). Are take-home naloxone programmes effective? Systematic review utilizing application of the Bradford Hill criteria. *Addiction*, 111, 1177-1187.

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- ^{vii} See, e.g., Park, J. N., Finkel, S., Morris, M., Dieni, O., Fahey-Morrison, L., Luta, M., Hunt, D., Long, J., & Sherman, S. G. (2021). Evaluation of fentanyl test strip distribution in two Mid-Atlantic syringe service programs. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, *94*, 103196. doi: 10.1016/j.drugpo.2021.103196. See also, e.g., Peiper, N. C., Clarke, S. D., Vincent, L. B., Ciccarone, D., Kral, A. H., & Zibbell, J. E. (2019). Fentanyl test strips as an opioid overdose prevention strategy: Findings from a syringe services program in the Southeastern United States. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, *63*, 122-128.
- ^{viii} See, e.g., Samuels, E. A., Bailer, D. A., & Yolken, A. (2022). Overdose prevention centers: An essential strategy to address the overdose crisis. *JAMA Network Open*, *5*(7), e2222153. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.22153
- ^{ix} See, e.g., Connery, H. S. (2015). Medication-assisted treatment of opioid use disorder: Review of the evidence and future directions. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry*, *23*(2), 63-75.
- ^x See, e.g., Clifasefi, S. L., Lonczak, H. S., & Collins, S. E. (2017). Seattle's Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD) program: Within-subjects changes on housing, employment, and income/benefits outcomes and associations with recidivism. *Crime & Delinquency*, *63*(4), 429-445. See also Perrone, D., Malm, A., & Magana, E. J. (2022). Harm reduction policing: An evaluation of Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD) in San Francisco. *Police Quarterly*, *25*(1), 7-32. Additionally, see Collins, S. E., Lonczak, H. S., & Clifasefi, S. L. (2017). Seattle's Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD): Program effects on recidivism outcomes. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, *64*, 49-56.
- ^{xi} Woodhall-Melnik, J. R. & Dunn, J. R. (2016). A systemic review of outcomes associated with participation in Housing First programs. *Housing Studies*, *31*(3), 287-304.