



Skagit County's Opioid Workgroup Leadership Team created a plan to meet several goals: prevent opioid misuse, treat opioid dependence, expand access to medication assisted treatment and prevent deaths.

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Community comes together to fight opioid crisis

By Skagit County Public Health

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When people come together, big things can happen.

A group of Skagit County individuals and organizations has proven just that in ongoing efforts to find a path forward through the seemingly impenetrable opioid crisis.

Back in 2015, representatives from across community sectors came together as the Population Health Trust to examine Skagit County's most pressing health issues. The goal was to identify priority health and wellness concerns for the community and work together across sectors on projects designed to improve well-being, explains Kristen Ekstran, Community Health Analyst, Skagit County Public Health.

Topping the list of issues was opioids. The PHT pulled together a team of community experts known as the Opioid Workgroup Leadership Team (OWLT) including emergency services, the medical community and treatment providers among others to develop a plan. After eight months of intensive assets and gaps mapping “we had a much clearer picture of what was really happening,” Ekstran says.

The group created a plan that would meet several goals: prevent opioid misuse, treat opioid dependence, expand access to medication assisted treatment and prevent deaths.

“One of the major successes of this is that the community has come together – organizations that never worked together before are collaborating to solve the problem.”

A path forward

Many of the action steps in the Skagit County plan have either been achieved or are on-going work. Two of the actions have the potential to be highly impactful.

First, is a Secure Medicine Return ordinance which requires that the pharmaceutical industry pay for the safe and proper disposal of unwanted and expired medications which can't be flushed or thrown in the garbage without harming the environment, explains retired longtime pharmacist and Trust member, Randy Elde.

“Through the Secure Medicine Return, we now have more and more locations where people can easily and safely return unused medications,” Elde says.

Second, emergency services and hospitals are required to report overdoses, which will help the community understand where to target resources and allows for community outreach.

“From a law enforcement perspective, that's what got me involved with this,” says Police Chief Lin Tucker. “We're dealing with the short-term effects – the raw effects of people using.”

To be able to connect those individuals with avenues for support, or treatment if they're ready, is a vital piece of the puzzle and one that's only possible with different organizations working together.

“It gives you the chance to look at this from a different angle and if we attack this from every angle we possibly can, we'll affect a lot more people,” he says.

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Seeing first-hand the range of people affected also makes it clear that opioid misuse – and its impact – is not limited to a specific demographic. “This is an every person issue,” Chief Tucker emphasizes. “And we need to give those who want it, a hand.”

Looking ahead, the Trust will continue to involve the community in finding solutions.

Elde, Chief Tucker and other OWLT members continue to make community presentations, raising awareness about local initiatives. They also address issues like expanding medication-assisted treatment as the standard of care for opioid misuse disorder, and reducing stigma, to make it easier for people to talk about addiction and seek help.

The Trust is also working on a way to better share information, eyeing a “resource hub” model that would help residents better navigate an often confusing system of resources and supports.

“We’ve asked the community to come along with us, and we’ve seen great impact by doing this,” Elde says. “Everybody who gets involved in this has the opportunity to pay it forward.”

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