



Mecklenburg County Opioid Task Force Spotlight

Mecklenburg County discovered a growing need for substance use intervention after conducting a community health assessment in 2015. Area leaders formed a task force to begin addressing top issues. That task force was beginning to assess its progress in 2017 when they learned about the Opioid Response Project available through the UNC School of Government. The team points to the Opioid Response Project as instrumental in helping to realign their priorities to take their progress further.

“It was a pivotal moment for us,” said Victoria Beaton, prevention specialist with Anuvia Prevention and Recovery. “The project helped put us on a more direct path to our goals, going back to do important work like establishing group norms and doing some strategic planning.”



The Mecklenburg team had an initial goal of establishing their presence as a community group. They began pulling together educational materials like one-pagers, business cards, and the design of a Facebook page. “We wanted the community to better understand who we are and what we do,” said Beaton. “That community buy-in was a huge step in the right direction for us.”

The team also established a Transitional Care Work Group, including treatment providers and physicians with the bigger hospitals, like Atrium and Novant. The goal was working toward a system for better supporting emergency room patients experiencing overdose. The work group helped create a system of accountability to make sure emergency departments contact treatment facilities, so they are ready to receive patients after an overdose. They also created

an assessment to help determine if patients are eligible for various treatment facilities to avoid negative experiences for the patient.



Establishing medication assisted treatment (MAT) options was another early focus of the Mecklenburg County Opioid Response Task Force. “Harm reduction is becoming a more accepted form of treatment,” said Beaton. “Projects like this have paved the way for MAT to become more mainstream.” The task force also supported local access to syringe exchange services. They hope to lease a permanent site where syringe exchange services can take place safely in a controlled environment and connecting patients to treatment can be a natural secondary outcome.

In such a large, urban community, the team faced challenges gaining attention as a top priority. Participation with the Opioid Response Project helped them better define their task force and the issue they were working to address. That focus helped them get more attention at the county level. The team was also quite large and composed of busy community leaders, so they benefited from the structure the Opioid Response Project provided. “We needed a system for holding us accountable for follow-through,” said Beaton.



The team points to the Opioid Response Project forums as instrumental in improving the effectiveness of the Mecklenburg task force. Members were able to network with other community leaders from around the state, gathering ideas and feedback to help them grow. “I can’t say enough good things about this experience,” said Beaton. “The School of Government team really cared about what we wanted and needed. They helped us discover areas we needed to improve and roadblocks we needed to move.”

Next up for the task force is a system for tracking their impact on the community's needs. It can be hard to stop and acknowledge the work you have done and articulate the progress made. "We'll be working on clear data reporting to help boost political will and buy-in from our community," said Beaton. "With help from the Opioid Response Project, we feel like we have the tools we need to make our work long-lasting and sustainable."

To learn more about the Opioid Response Project coordinated by the ncIMPACT Initiative, please visit: <https://www.sog.unc.edu/opioidresponseproject>.

