

Wilkes County Impact Report Narratives for Fiscal Year 2023-2024

Each local government that receives opioid settlement funds is asked to share a “brief general narrative,” summarizing how it used opioid settlement funds during the previous fiscal year, along with progress reports and success stories for each of the strategies it funded. Wilkes County provided the following information for Fiscal Year 2023-2024 (July 2023 through June 2024):

General Narrative

Wilkes County has used opioid settlement funds this year to help individuals suffering from substance use disorder, help prevent opioid misuse and overdose deaths, help families and individuals find housing, and help increase access to medication assisted treatment. Wilkes County partnered with The Health Foundation and its Community Opioid Prevention and Education (COPE) collaborative. COPE is a broad cross-sector collaboration with a goal of addressing the high rates of substance use disorder and overdose deaths. Wilkes County, The Health Foundation and COPE understand that complex problems cannot be solved by any single person, entity, or program, and that is why our team utilizes a facilitated Collective Impact approach. A steering committee, a sub-set of the COPE team, reviewed applications and selected the following strategies to recommend funding; Recovery Support Services, Evidence-Based Addiction Treatment, Naloxone Distribution, Addressing the Needs of Criminal Justice Involved Persons, Employment Related Services, and Prevent the Misuse of Opioids. All agencies followed the Results Based Accountability method to evaluate their strategies to determine how much they did, how well they did it, and if anyone was better off. Agencies reported evaluation measures at 6 months and at the end of the fiscal year. We will continue to look at the significant impact the opioid settlement funds have with respect to helping support individuals who are affected by this devastating epidemic.

Progress Reports and Success Stories for Funded Strategies

❖ Exhibit A, Strategy 3: Recovery Support Services

Progress Report

Three agencies helped to make the Recovery Support Services strategy a success. Wilkes Recovery Revolution’s recovery center expanded services by offering day-shelter support to the local unhoused population, providing a safe space for case management with peer support, a community kitchen, a peer living room, mail services, and storage space for personal items. The construction and installation of showers and laundry facilities addressed health and hygiene needs, significantly improving the overall well-being of their participants. Additionally, the hiring of a Guest Services Coordinator ensured a welcoming and supportive environment for all visitors. Overall, the program’s administrative capacity was bolstered, ensuring the growth and long-term sustainability of their services through effective management, oversight, and resource allocation. Hospitality House strategically utilized funding to help guarantee permanent re-housing services for individuals and families from Wilkes County affected by opioid use disorder alongside homelessness. For households that could not be immediately rehoused, Hospitality House used funding to provide critical outreach services to these households linking them to services including Hospitality House’s emergency shelter, housing assistance programs, access to job opportunities through job search, and access to cash/non-cash benefits for those who qualified and needed help with the application/enrollment process. North Wilkesboro Comprehensive Treatment Center (Mountain Health Solutions) was able to hire their own

peer support specialist for the first time to assist each individual who needed greater support and access to local resources. The peer helped patients with wrap around services such as transportation, food assistance, housing resources, counseling and improved the person's overall well-being.

Success Story

Hospitality House program staff met with a client who is a single mother from Wilkes County with a long history of domestic violence and coerced substance use. The individual had been in and out of temporary housing for the last several years, where she had repeatedly lost custody of her child, and often spent time incarcerated because of illicit survival strategies and homelessness. Following her initial engagement with services, the client was able to locate affordable housing within walking distance of her recovery services center, create a monthly budget with room for savings, pay off her debt to her former utility provider, and furnish her housing with supplies from the Hospitality House Fresh Start program. Hospitality House was able to provide critical financial assistance to this client including housing deposits and first month rent utilizing opioid settlement funds. Our agency street outreach workers assisted this client with moving into her house as well as with following up on necessary paperwork to receive Section-8 rental assistance for long-term stability. Following rehousing, the client reports: I have, since being rehoused, held steady employment, bought a car, and got my son back home full time and my case with DSS closed completely! I am almost 7 months sober. I enjoy life again! Hospitality House is pleased to be able to have this degree of impact on those individuals in our community that have been deeply impacted by the opioid epidemic. We are all seeing firsthand the amazing impact that this settlement funding can have on our community when the money goes directly to serving those who were impacted by opioid use disorder.

❖ Exhibit A, Strategy 2: Evidence-Based Addiction Treatment

Progress Report

Wilkes County EMS was able to establish a MAT bridge program that facilitated the transition for individuals seeking recovery. This Community Paramedic program closed the gap between the realization of the need for recovery and the commencement of long-term treatment in an office-based setting. North Wilkesboro Comprehensive Treatment Center (Mountain Health Solutions) and Wilkes County believe MAT is the gold standard for treating opioid use disorder and understand that treatment alone is insufficient. Their objective with the opioid settlement funds was to help uninsured and underinsured patients afford treatment and eliminate barriers to care stemming from social determinants of health. By providing transportation, emergency shelter, legal assistance, and help with utility bills, they were able to support the whole person in their recovery journey. These two agencies worked together to meet people where they were and support them as they initiated their path to recovery.

Success Story

Two agencies helped to make the Evidence Based Addiction Treatment strategy a success. A Mountain Health Solutions patient stated: "Not only have I broken through the cycle of addiction and have a quality of recovery today that I've never had in the 20 years of my clawing at trying to get it, but I've also been able to work through surrounding mental health issues that attributed to my addiction issues. My last relapse before coming to Mountain Health Solutions, I lost everything. And one of the biggest barriers to getting into recovery services is usually financial or transportation. But they have eliminated all those barriers with the help of the community and grants. If it weren't for that, I would not be a business owner today, have a home, pay my bills, married in a successful marriage, a pillar in my church community, and an available and healthy mom of a son and stepdaughter."

One of Wilkes EMS Community Paramedic patients was referred as a heavy fentanyl user. He was homeless and unemployed. He was very dedicated to his recovery process in our program. Today, he is employed, has moved into transitional housing, is in his sixth month of recovery, and continues to refer his peers to our program.

❖ **Exhibit A, Strategy 7: Naloxone Distribution**

Progress Report

Three agencies helped to make naloxone distribution a success. Wilkes Recovery Revolution's Wilkes Harm Reduction Collective (WHRC) increased naloxone availability and distribution among various community stakeholders, contributing to a notable reduction in overdose deaths. The launch of the post-overdose response team (PORT), in collaboration with Wilkes County EMS's Community Paramedics and Police Departments, provided timely harm reduction services, peer support, and crisis assistance to individuals who recently experienced an overdose. WHRC continues to experience rapid growth, expanding its reach and impact through community engagement and advocacy efforts. Wilkes County Public Library ordered a vending machine for the building, in an alcove near the entrance. Putting the machine outside was an effort to reduce barriers to access. Project Lazarus provided the initial inventory for stocking this machine, and library staff monitored usage. They initially received 120 units of naloxone, 200 fentanyl test strips, and 200 xylazine test strips. They restock the machine as needed, sometimes daily. Wilkes County EMS utilized this strategy to help reduce harm for Wilkes County residents by assisting patients who currently use drugs by providing them with education, wound care, and naloxone.

Success Story

One of Wilkes EMS Community Paramedic patients came to them with chronic opioid use disorder. She had been unemployed for years with a history of incarceration. Today, she has 6 months in recovery, is volunteering at a local recovery network, and is actively looking for full-time work. Wilkes County Public Library reports: "Soon after releasing a news article and several social media blasts, we received a call from High Point News who wanted to share our story. They were hoping to inspire similar resources in their county and applauded the efforts of our library for this new service."

Wilkes Recovery Revolution says: Another powerful example of our program's impact involves a participant who initially engaged with us through our harm reduction services. This individual frequently visited our syringe service program (SSP), consistently accepting and utilizing the safer use practices we provided. Over time, they began inquiring about treatment options, showing a desire to transition towards recovery. With our support and encouragement, they were inducted on MAT through our partnership with the Community Paramedics. After completing their initial seven days of dosing, we connected them with a long-term provider, with whom they remain engaged. Additionally, they have moved into our transitional housing program and are currently residents. This participant's journey from harm reduction to long-term recovery and stable housing highlights the comprehensive support our program offers and the positive outcomes it fosters.

❖ **Exhibit B, Strategy D5: Address the Needs of Criminal-Justice-Involved Persons: Provide evidence-informed treatment, including MAT, recovery support, harm reduction, or other appropriate services to individuals with OUD and any co-occurring SUD/MH conditions who are leaving jail or prison, have recently left jail or prison, are on probation or parole, are under community corrections supervision, or are in re-entry programs or facilities.**

Progress Report

Project Lazarus helped make Address the Needs of Criminal Justice Involved Persons strategy a success. The Lazarus Justice Involved Sustainability Project alleviated the barriers that justice-involved individuals faced when reentering the community, and increased access to MAT as well as other recovery, treatment, and support resources for justice-involved individuals who are struggling with substance use disorder, and/or mental illness. Project Lazarus provided many individuals with resources, referrals, connections, assistance, and guidance to dismantle the barriers that individuals face when leaving incarceration in Wilkes County. As a result, this has increased many participants protective factors, which are factors in one's life that protect against recidivism, promote successful reentry into the community and sober living. Their peer support specialists also educated their participants with life skills such as budgeting, self-motivation, self-confidence, decision-making, coping with stress, time management, resiliency, and refusal skills. Transportation assistance was invaluable to participants who needed transport to treatment appointments, the doctor's office, court, or probation meetings as needed. With housing being one of the most pressing challenges upon release, Project Lazarus utilized opioid settlement funds to provide the first month rent for transitional housing. Peer support specialists also helped participants to complete supplemental nutrition assistance program benefits applications to receive more long-term food assistance. By filling in the gaps and meeting the individual's basic needs it allowed the participant to focus on their recovery, complete their probation requirements, and obtain employment.

Success Story

Project Lazarus's peer support reports: "I have a client that started MOUD on January 31st, 2024. When they took this first step toward a new life, they would have told you that they didn't expect much to come of it. They had tried basically every medication out there on the market to curb their cravings for opioids and alcohol. They would tell you, anything they could inject, they would. The client lives a very different life today since starting MOUD. The client kept going back, month after month. The client is no longer homeless with nowhere to go. They had entered independent living. They also regained custody of their 9-year-old son two weeks ago. The client maintains themselves as a busy person today. The client takes care of their son, their home, and is working two jobs. The client is now seven days away from celebrating seven months sober from all substances. The client's life would look very different if Project Lazarus didn't have the resources to get them the treatment and support that they needed beginning that day in January."

❖ **Exhibit B, Strategy G1: Prevent Misuse of Opioids: Fund media campaigns to prevent opioid misuse**

Progress Report

Prevent Misuse of Opioids was a success because of Wilkes County's Health Department. By numerous media outlets and community events, Wilkes Health Department had the opportunity to raise awareness and educate the Wilkes County community on the dangers of opioid misuse. "Be the Solution" media campaign messaging focused on raising awareness around the disposal of unwanted and expired prescription medication, safe and secure storage, not sharing medications, and taking prescriptions as they are prescribed to the patient. The negative and harmful effects of prescription

medications were highlighted through social media posts, billboards, radio messaging, the newspaper, flyers, and community outreach events to prevent the occurrence of unintentional poisonings and future substance use disorder. Thanks to the help of community partners, billboard designs were developed and placed in two locations of the county, medication take-back events took place, Wilkes community members pledged to safely store and dispose of medications. Wilkes Health worked to educate the community on the different methods of safely disposing medications both on social media and through in-person interaction at community events. A list of local medication drop boxes was available for those who needed access or were unaware of places to take their medications in Wilkes. On multiple occasions they spoke with community members who were not aware of the drop boxes accessible to Wilkes County residents. Wilkes Health provided residents with resources to keep their home and family safe from the danger of prescription medication misuse.

Success Story

Prior to the last medication take-back event, Wilkes County Health Department had not been able to collect any amount of dosage units at our own take-back event in quite some time. We would host 2 to 3-hour take-back events and not collect any medications from the community. Leading up to our last medication take-back event (5/4/2024) with Wilkes Youth Life Development (WYLD), a lot of work and preparation went into the planning of Operation Medicine Drop. We posted about the event weeks in advance, made flyers and yard signs, and informed community partners. Efforts to boost the event paid off when we collected a total of 6 lbs. of medications during the take back event. Three different Wilkes County residents had read or heard about the event and drove by to drop off their unwanted or expired medications. This was a small amount of medication dropped off, but a small success is still a success. From the start of our “Be the Solution” media campaign until our final report a few of the medication drop box locations in the county have reported an increase in medication returns. The drop boxes are having to be emptied more often and are filling up quicker.