

Reducing opioid deaths through harm reduction

Grant will allow support, outreach in Yuma

The overdose crisis has earned its designation as an epidemic. Opioid overdose has killed 949 Arizonans in 2017 — more than double the 454 lives it took a mere five years prior. And opioids are changing even more lives than they take.

Cases of hepatitis C and HIV have skyrocketed alongside opioid use, particularly in rural areas of the state. But no community is immune. Every county in Arizona has been affected, and it's going to take a statewide effort to solve the opioid problem.

HARM REDUCTION IN ACTION

As the 2018 Arizona Opioid Epidemic Act takes aim at the overdose crisis through prescription and dosage limits, Sonoran Prevention Works focuses on overdose prevention



By Haley Coles
 Guest Columnist

and harm reduction with people who use opioids.

Why harm reduction? According to national data, less than 5 percent of individuals with substance use disorder think they need treatment. Understanding that until a person is ready for treatment, they are at risk for death, disease, and high costs to public systems, it is imperative that we take a harm reduction approach to improve health outcomes, while increasing the chances of future success.

To meet that need, one of the greatest areas of opportunity Sonoran Prevention Works sees is tackling the perpetuation of stigma that

surrounds opioid use, so that we can end the health disparities faced by those made vulnerable by drug use.

Sonoran Prevention Works also provides community workshops and trainings on overdose recognition and response, hepatitis C, naloxone use, needle-stick prevention, and more in an effort to educate people who use opioids, their families, and community service providers. We also offer Naloxone to people who are at risk of an overdose as well as family members and health providers.

In January 2017, Sonoran Prevention Works began its statewide Overdose Education and Naloxone Distribution program. Since then, we've:

- Held over 1,500 overdose prevention events in all 15 counties and on 12 tribal lands

- Distributed over 190,000 doses of naloxone. Impressively, we received reports of 6,383 lives saved as a result of the naloxone we distributed — 99 percent of those rescues were performed by people who use drugs.

OUR MOBILIZE AZ GRANT

Sonoran Prevention Works depends heavily on close relationships with other entities to conduct this level of outreach, including Southern Arizona AIDS Foundation, Shot In The Dark, Community Medical Services, and AHCCCS.

In 2018, Sonoran Prevention Works was fortunate to receive a \$137,763 expansion grant from Mobilize AZ. Through the Mobilize AZ initiative, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Arizona is investing \$10 million over three years to turn the tide against opioid misuse. The grant will allow us to support and expand outreach in Yuma, Phoenix, Tucson, Kingman, Flagstaff, Hol-

brook, Prescott, Payson, Globe, Sierra Vista, and on the Navajo Nation. It will also allow us to expand our statewide harm-reduction efforts, including:

- Distributing naloxone and fentanyl test strips
- Dispensing health and hygiene supplies
- Providing rapid HIV and hepatitis C testing
- Offering emergency housing vouchers
- Providing transportation to social and medical appointments
- Delivering individualized and group educational sessions in the community and in jails on substance use disorder, overdose prevention, and treatment
- Providing support to pregnant women who use drugs

Staff will be able to act as full-time advocates for people struggling with substance use and will engage with them on levels that individuals feel comfortable with, from distribution of wound care supplies and fentanyl test strips,

to a conversation about HIV and hepatitis risk factors, to multi-month case planning to address coping skills, housing, and recovery.

By focusing on harm reduction, we can have a significant effect on our state and the overdose epidemic. We're grateful for organizations like Blue Cross Blue Shield of Arizona that can see the big picture. When we work together, there's no telling how great our impact can be.

For more details on opioids, plus tips on how you can support a loved one dealing with substance use issues, check out mobilizeaz.com.

Haley Coles is executive director of Sonoran Prevention Works, which recently received a grant from Blue Cross Blue Shield of Arizona to expand its work in to Yuma to provide community workshops, trainings, consultation and risk reduction materials to individuals, families, and organizations in order to prevent HIV, Hepatitis C, overdose and the perpetuation of stigma.