

ONEIDA COUNTY OVERDOSE FATALITY REVIEW

CASE #5, OFR REVIEW ON MARCH 13, 2024

# MEETING REFLECTIONS



**OPIOID TASK FORCE CHAIRS:**

Anthony J. Picente, Jr. County Executive  
Robert M. Maciol, Sheriff  
Todd C. Carville, District Attorney



# Overdose Fatality Review (OFR)

The OFR is a collaborative initiative of the Oneida County Opioid Task Force (OTF) with representatives from more than 33 government, health care, education, treatment and recovery, law enforcement, social service and other community-based organizations. Its mission is to explore the issues and obstacles related to drug overdose fatalities by conducting confidential case reviews of local overdose deaths. The shared understanding that overdose deaths are preventable and addiction is a disease that should be addressed without stigma and shame, guides the entire OFR process.

Participants examine a person's demographics, psychosocial history, treatment history, medical records, crisis system encounters, and other prominent risk factors associated with drug overdoses to identify missed opportunities for intervention to strengthen overdose prevention strategies, improve system-level operations, inform local service providers, public policy, and ultimately to reduce the number of overdose deaths in Oneida County.

## Dedication

We recognize that each case reviewed by the Oneida County Overdose Fatality Review Team represents the death of a person whose absence is grieved by friends, family, and community. We dedicate this report to those who have lost their life and to those who have suffered the loss of a loved one to overdose.

## Meeting Objective

The mission of the Oneida County OFR is to explore the issues and obstacles related to local drug overdose fatalities. The committee conducts confidential case reviews of overdose deaths that occur within our local jurisdiction. In the meeting, OFR team members review an individual's demographic details, psychosocial and treatment histories, medical records, crisis interactions, and key risk factors for drug overdoses. Their goal is to pinpoint overlooked chances for intervention, enhance overdose prevention tactics, optimize system efficiency, guide local services and policies, and ultimately decrease overdose fatalities in Oneida County.

## Confidentiality

Agencies that agreed to share data, and participants of the OFR, all completed data-sharing and confidentiality agreements.

# Methodology

Representatives from the Oneida County Opioid Task Force selected a fatal drug overdose case to be reviewed by the OFR team. The case was reviewed during a two hour meeting on March 13, 2024. Case criteria included a date of death within the 2023 calendar year, a cause of death attributed to overdose of prescription or illicit drugs, and an accidental or undetermined manner of death.

A preliminary review of demographic data, death data (i.e. location, cause of death, forensic narrative), and case attributes was completed. The following data was collected on this case:

- **Decedent demographic data:** Age, sex, race, county of residence, length of residency
- **Circumstances of fatal overdose:** Forensic investigator narrative, first responder reports (i.e. EMS, law enforcement interaction), toxicology report
- **Medical history:** Hospitalization, family history, Substance Use Disorder treatment history, and wellness checkups
- **Case attributes** (decedent risk factors): DSS history, housing status history, and other factors
- **Next-of-Kin Interviews.** The decedent's wife was interviewed on several occasions for her perspective on the decedent, and to learn more about the person, risk factors, and other potential contributing factors. Excerpts from audio recordings were shared during the OFR.

# Meeting Reflections

The case of "Ted Smith" was presented in summary and then the meeting was facilitated to encourage participation by all attendees (in-person and virtual). There was an enthusiasm from OFR members to explore the themes related to the decedent's overdose and advocate for system change and standards of care.

## MEETING SUCCESSES:

- The data-sharing component of OFR gave our community an opportunity to examine system barriers, to discuss shared challenges and to provide local solutions to prevent future overdose deaths. Members also exchanged information and discussed programmatic successes.
- This case review discussion helped destigmatize substance use disorder by shifting the focus from the individual to the systems and environments that hinder successful treatment and recovery.





# Meeting Themes and Strategies

The recent overdose fatality review session conducted by our team has provided critical insights into the complex interplay of factors contributing to substance use and overdose fatalities. Through a thorough examination of an individual case, we have identified seven key themes that not only shed light on the specific circumstances of the decedent but also illuminate broader systemic issues and opportunities for intervention. These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of substance use disorders and the need for holistic, informed approaches in both healthcare and social contexts.

## **Impact of Trauma and Stress**

The decedent's history revealed that a combination of traumatic experiences and acute stressors played a pivotal role in their tragic demise. Notable among these were the loss of close family members, a beloved pet, and the stress associated with increased work responsibilities following promotions. This pattern suggests a critical need for more effective support systems to help individuals cope with trauma and stress, particularly when they are compounded by professional pressures.

## **Challenges of Recovery and Coping Mechanisms**

Characterized as a perfectionist who deeply valued his recovery, the decedent encountered significant challenges when faced with multiple stressors, leading to a concealment of these struggles. A concerning response was the turn to unregulated, legal substances like tianeptine (brands "Neptune" and "Zaza") and Kratom, as believed by the decedent's next of kin. This behavior serves as a potential indicator of relapse risk, highlighting the necessity for a public awareness campaign about the dangers of such substances and the importance of supportive networks for individuals in recovery.

## **Workplace Stigma and Its Effects**

The review identified the pressing need to address the stigma associated with recovery within certain workplace cultures. Negative perceptions and attitudes towards substance use can severely impact the self-esteem and performance of employees in recovery, often deterring them from seeking help. Research from NIH suggests a higher prevalence of opioid overdoses among individuals in physically demanding, precarious jobs with limited healthcare benefits. This finding points towards a critical role for employers in fostering supportive environments and implementing preventative measures.

## **Social Withdrawal as a Warning Sign**

In the months preceding the decedent's passing, the decedent became increasingly withdrawn, a common trait observed in other cases as well. This behavior underscores the importance of public education campaigns encouraging community members to actively engage with and support those exhibiting withdrawal symptoms, especially when combined with known or suspected drug use.

## **Healthcare Engagement Patterns**

The decedent had a lengthy history of medical interactions, a pattern often seen in overdose cases. This observation suggests an opportunity for healthcare providers to identify such histories and direct patients to appropriate support services. However, the review acknowledged the challenges healthcare providers face in dedicating time to this level of detail, due in part to widespread staffing shortages in the healthcare industry.

## **Complex Substance Use Histories**

The decedent's history included the use of both illicit and prescribed medications, encompassing stimulants, depressants, and over-the-counter sleep aids. This complexity highlights the necessity for healthcare professionals to be vigilant for such patterns, though this is more feasibly managed by a consistent healthcare provider like a Primary Care Physician, and more challenging with multiple caregivers in varied settings.

## **Holistic Approach to Treatment**

A key conclusion from the review suggests that healthcare providers, mental health professionals, and substance use counselors should adopt a more holistic approach in treating their patients. This involves considering the full spectrum of factors affecting an individual, ranging from personal history to current circumstances, thereby enabling more effective and comprehensive care.

The insights gained from this overdose fatality review session are invaluable in highlighting the intricate and multifaceted nature of substance use disorders. The themes identified—from the profound impact of personal trauma and stress to the nuances of recovery within the context of societal and workplace stigmas—emphasize the urgent need for holistic, empathetic approaches in addressing substance use. These findings call for concerted efforts across various sectors, including healthcare, mental health, workplace environments, and community support systems, to foster more effective, compassionate, and comprehensive strategies. Such an integrated approach is not only vital in aiding individuals in their recovery journey but also crucial in preventing future tragedies, ensuring that individuals grappling with substance use disorders receive the nuanced care and support they need and deserve.





# Conclusion

The findings of this overdose fatality review underscore the importance of proactive interventions and improved coordination among agencies in identifying and supporting individuals at risk of overdose. By addressing these key themes, Oneida County can work towards reducing overdose fatalities and providing more effective assistance to vulnerable individuals in the community.

# Implementation

The recommended strategies will be integrated into the Opioid Task Force as projects as well as promoted to partners for adoption at the organizational and/or programmatic level. OTF partners will report on the progress of collaborative interventions and highlight ways in which recommendations have been implemented at the system, agency/sector and/or population-specific level. Community Based Organizations and/or Subcommittees with neutral conveners and representatives from key partner agencies may be formed to develop strategic implementation workplans.

# Acknowledgements

Our sincerest thanks to the organizations participating in this overdose fatality review for sharing data, insights, experiences and expertise that fostered an objective, thoughtful and honest evaluation of actions that can help prevent future overdose deaths.

ACR HEALTH  
BEACON CENTER  
CENTER FOR FAMILY LIFE & RECOVERY, INC.  
HELIO HEALTH  
MIDSTATE EMS  
MOHAWK VALLEY CRIME ANALYSIS CENTER  
MOHAWK VALLEY HEALTH SYSTEM  
MOHAWK VALLEY HOUSING & HOMELESS COALITION  
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTY & CITY HEALTH OFFICIALS  
NY MATTERS  
NY/NJ HIGH INTENSITY DRUG TRAFFICKING AREA  
NYSDOH OFFICE OF DRUG USER HEALTH  
ONEIDA COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF FAMILY & COMMUNITY SERVICES  
ONEIDA COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY OFFICE  
ONEIDA COUNTY EMERGENCY SERVICES  
ONEIDA COUNTY EXECUTIVE'S OFFICE  
ONEIDA COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT  
ONEIDA COUNTY MENTAL HEALTH DEPARTMENT  
ONEIDA COUNTY PLANNING DEPARTMENT  
ONEIDA COUNTY PROBATION  
ONEIDA COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE  
ONEIDA COUNTY LAW DEPARTMENT  
ONEIDA HEALTH HOSPITAL  
ONONDAGA COUNTY MEDICAL EXAMINER'S OFFICE  
PRIMEAU-FAHEY STUDIOS  
ROME CITY SCHOOL  
SALVATION ARMY  
UPSTATE FAMILY HEALTH CENTER  
UTICA POLICE DEPARTMENT

## Appendix A — Recommendation Workplan (To Be Developed by the State, County, and/or CBOs)

Recommendation Type	Recommendation	Activity/Action Steps	Lead Agency & Supporting Agencies	Timeline
Systemic	<p><b>Peer support/advocate.</b> Peer support services (including home visits) by people with lived experience can offer support with coping habits, managing recovery, and navigating services. Maximize awareness and usage of tools that provide linkage to peer support in various community settings (i.e., NY MATTERS Program). (<i>Examples of settings including but not limited to corrections, hospitals, primary care, shelters, etc.</i>)</p>			
Agency/Sector-specific	<p><b>Expanded harm reduction promotion.</b></p>			
	<p>“ Increase awareness of resources such as Naloxone and Fentanyl Test Strips including campaigns that destigmatize need to carry these tools and increasing knowledge of risks associated with illicit fentanyl and stimulants (i.e., cocaine, methamphetamine).</p>			
	<p>“ Increase awareness and promotion of Never Use Alone Hotline.</p>			
<p>“ Increase public education on recognition of signs of overdose.</p>				
Population-specific	<p><b>Family loss program.</b> Post overdose follow up program supporting families experiencing grief and loss due to overdose death.</p>			
Agency/Sector-specific	<p><b>Law enforcement high-risk referrals.</b> Law enforcement referral for process for intervention prior to overdose, arrest and/or crisis situations.</p>			
Systemic	<p><b>Holistic treatment.</b> Consider programs that go beyond the patient and support the entire family with education about substance use disorder, mental health, and services in the community, and how to access them.</p>			
Systemic	<p><b>User-friendly centralized and coordinated resources.</b> Strategies that facilitated a more coordinated and centralized system of care and/or additional training about referral sources may help (i.e., regular trainings provided to local healthcare providers on behavioral health trends and community resources).</p>			



ONEIDA COUNTY  
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