

Utah Framework for People Who Use Substances Health and Wellness

Purpose

The Utah Framework for People Who Use Substances Health and Wellness (Framework) was inspired by the “California HIV/AIDS Planning Group Framework for Injection Drug User Health and Wellness, 2009” written by the California HIV Planning Group’s Substance Use/ People Who Use Drugs (PWUD) Task Force. California developed this framework due to challenges sustaining prevention efforts for HIV, Hepatitis C (HCV) and overdose, specifically for PWUD and people who inject drugs (PWID). The focus is on a single issue, such as HIV prevention, instead of the diverse health and wellness needs of PWID. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) are among the organizations that have recommended comprehensive services as the most effective way of preventing harmful health outcomes for PWUDs.

At the Utah Department of Health (UDOH), current efforts to address the unique needs of Utahns affected by drug use are spread across various programs, bureaus and divisions, which limits the effectiveness and overall impact of interventions. There is precedence for public health to address the common health needs and risks of a particular population based on age, gender, life stage and other connecting circumstances. Establishing a Utah Framework for People Who Use Substances Health and Wellness will establish an infrastructure to address the needs of people who currently use, or misuse, legal or illegal substances.

This approach will increase efficiency while responding to changing drug threat(s), outbreak response and management and provide appropriate services to vulnerable communities affected by drug, alcohol and other substance use. Additionally, UDOH can better align itself with national initiatives such as the Viral Hepatitis Action Plan, National Opioid Crisis plans, the National HIV/AIDS Strategy and the National Strategy for Hepatitis B and C Elimination. All of these national plans have recommendations for coordinated efforts to reduce the health harms associated with substance use at the state and local level.

Key Principles

The Framework is based on the following key principles:

1. People who use substances have a right to protect their own health and the health of those around them
2. People who use substances should have the means by which to protect their health, including access to sterile injection and other drug using equipment sufficient to meet their needs
3. All people who use substances should receive accurate, unbiased and non-judgmental information about illicit drugs and other substances
4. All people who use substances should receive the same level of care as any other individual accessing health care or social services
5. People who use substances should have access to substance use disorder treatment on demand;
6. Providers should recognize the valid and valuable expertise that people who use substances can give to designing, delivering and evaluating effective services

7. Health care, public health and social service professionals should ensure that the provision of services to people who use substances is not contingent upon the individual's agreement to enter drug treatment, or abstain from drug use. Service providers must not withhold appropriate treatments or services from people who use substances
8. Services should be provided in a manner that encourages engagement and retention in care.

Comprehensive and integrated services

The goals of this framework aim to better facilitate an effective and holistic approach for individuals with co-occurring health needs. Some of these services may include:

- Overdose prevention (of substances known to have a high risk of overdose including stimulants, opioids and other depressants)
- Safe drug using equipment to reduce transmission of HIV, HCV and HBV
- Medical treatment referrals for r medical issues associated with drug use (endocarditis, blood and soft tissue damage, etc)
- Tobacco cessation
- Medicated assisted treatment (MAT)
- Recovery and treatment services
- HIV/HCV/STD testing
- HAV/HBV vaccination
- Supportive housing
- Social/peer support
- Mental health services/suicide prevention
- Pregnancy and maternal health issues
- Medical Cannabis

Outcomes and benefits of this coordinated approach include:

- Reduces duplication of effort across programs
- Identify and respond to funding opportunities more effectively
- Ability to break down organizational barriers that may impede a comprehensive approach
- Increased efficiency in the use of limited resources (personnel, funding, etc)
- Minimizes risk aversion within organization
- Increases visibility and addresses stigma

Proposed Action Steps

1. Provide safer injection education to all active people who use substances;
2. Offer overdose prevention education and response, and distribute naloxone, especially to people who have been recently incarcerated or in SUD treatment/detox;

3. Examine policies that exclude active people who use substances or limit their program participation by referring potential program participants to other agencies rather than serving them directly
4. Recognize the expertise people who use substances have by training and employing them as volunteers and staff
5. Expand syringe access across the state and to the highest risk areas by providing sterile syringes and safe disposal to people injecting substances
6. Ensure that staff members are trained to provide education and treatment referral for significant health issues, including hepatitis, abscess prevention and wound care
7. Ensure referrals to drug treatment are up-to-date, and include referrals to buprenorphine and methadone maintenance therapy where available