

Overdose Fatality Review Board in Rural Arizona a Blueprint for Success in Combating Substance Use

Overdose Deaths Decline Among Youth in Yavapai County, Thanks to Naloxone Distribution and Fentanyl Awareness Campaign

Catching Up With COSSUP, December 2023



Prescott (population 45,827) is the county seat of Yavapai County in central Arizona.

The [2023 annual report](#) of the Yavapai County, Arizona, Overdose Fatality Review (OFR) Board is nothing less than a beacon of hope for rural American communities battling substance use. It demonstrates that small towns and counties possess the social networks, resourcefulness, and resolve—strengths of rural areas everywhere—to reduce overdose deaths on a consistent basis—if they are able to equip local stakeholders with the partnerships and data they need to produce effective responses. In Yavapai County, the OFR has emerged as the best vehicle to deliver those data and those partnerships sustainably.

The report recorded an 18 percent decrease in overdose deaths in Yavapai County from 2020 to 2022, following a 108 percent *increase* from 2017 to 2020. And while it noted a troubling rise in overdose deaths among persons 60 years of age and older, one trend stood out above all others: deaths among youth under the age of 19 had remained at zero since 2021.

The decline was remarkable given the context: overdose deaths were increasing nearly everywhere else in the face of the inexorable rise of the synthetic opioid fentanyl in Arizona—the state through which a large majority of the deadly drug enters the United States, according to local police. And Yavapai County was not immune: 57 percent of the 68 overdose deaths in the county in 2022 involved fentanyl, and the percentage of deaths involving a combination of fentanyl and methamphetamine rose from 15 percent in 2021 to 24 percent in 2022, confirming a steady shift in the most commonly found overdose combination from heroin-methamphetamine to the deadlier fentanyl-methamphetamine.

OFRs: Turning the Tide in Rural Communities

Increasingly, American communities are putting OFRs—confidential death reviews conducted by multidisciplinary teams to improve overdose responses—at the heart of their substance use strategies. That is because they work. OFR teams' unique ability to break down silos between local stakeholder agencies and focus real-time data on evidence-based practices is making community responses proactive instead of reactive—and therefore more effective. As a result, recommendations based on OFR teams' reviews are informing local substantive improvements to local strategies across the country.

OFR teams operating in rural communities face specific challenges. Diffuse populations spread across large areas, limited transportation and treatment options, and ingrained stigma about addiction all complicate efforts to prevent and respond to overdoses. Yet rural areas also possess unique assets that OFR teams are using to their advantage: long-established, supportive, and people-centered networks accustomed to collaboration, resources in the face of scarce resources, and smaller bureaucracies in comparison to urban areas. The Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Program (COSSUP) is profiling OFR teams in rural areas that are leveraging those advantages to turn the tide of substance use toward healthier shores.

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In other words, the meteoric rise of fentanyl in Yavapai County drug supplies was more than offset by the reduction in overdose deaths among youth—an astounding achievement. And while it is difficult to draw a causal line from local substance use responses to improved outcomes, stakeholders in the county are unanimous in attributing it to initiatives prompted by two OFR Board recommendations: (1) increased distribution of lifesaving naloxone, including in county schools, and (2) an awareness campaign in county schools (*see page 5*) to warn students about the dangers of fentanyl.

So effective was the awareness campaign, in fact, that it has been recognized nationally as a model initiative: in 2022, the national High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas (HIDTA) program [cited it](#) with its annual 'Outstanding Public Health/Public Safety Collaborative Effort' award as a "first-of-its-kind effort to save lives in Arizona . . . a comprehensive toolkit with top-quality resources to aid communities in raising awareness of fentanyl and preventing and reversing overdoses. The work [has] brought much-needed education to the state to save lives."

MATFORCE: A Force for Change in Yavapai County



Merilee Fowler, Executive Director of MATFORCE

Putting those OFR Board recommendations into practice, in turn, was largely the work of a dynamic nonprofit organization, MATFORCE, and its executive director, Merilee Fowler, who was instrumental in the creation of the board. Its success is instructive for all rural communities interested in establishing OFR teams to combat overdose deaths.

Yavapai County Profile

Yavapai County is located in the center of Arizona. As of the 2020 U.S. Census, its population was 236,209, making it the fourth-most populous county in the state. The county has a total area of 8,128 square miles—larger than three U.S. states (Connecticut, Delaware, and Rhode Island) and the District of Columbia combined—of which 75 percent is publicly owned land. The county seat is Prescott, which has a population of 45,827. The county is named after the Yavapai people, a Native American tribe whose name means "people of the sun."



MATFORCE began in 2005 as a response to growing methamphetamine use (hence the name, short for Methamphetamine Task Force) in Yavapai County and, in particular, a four-car, four-fatality accident that occurred on New Year's Eve 2004 and shook the entire community, caused by a driver who had been high on methamphetamine for 3 days. One of MATFORCE's earliest activities, a methamphetamine impact study, showed that 68 percent of felonies committed in Yavapai County were connected to the drug. Mounting an effective response would require an all-hands-on-deck approach.

"Prior to MATFORCE, everyone in the county operated in silos," recalled MATFORCE Board Chair Sheila Polk, longtime Yavapai County Attorney until her recent retirement. "We had no relationship with behavioral health providers, for example. So we laid out the [meth] trend for the presiding judge, called a big meeting, and brought in behavioral health specialists, the schools, and law enforcement. We had no answers at that point. That was the genesis of MATFORCE."

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MATFORCE Board Chair Sheila Polk, former Yavapai County Attorney

"It was a transformative experience," Ms. Polk said. "We went from a reactive stance to one of prevention—just because everyone was sitting at the table now. Whereas before we wouldn't have known how to reach people on mental health issues, now we were developing relationships and breaking down those silos."

Leveraging Assets of Rural Communities

Consequently, from the outset, MATFORCE valued collaboration above other strategies. To all of its stated goals—supporting prevention programs for youth and their families, influencing public opinion and policy, increasing intervention and treatment capacity in the county, and addressing underage drinking—MATFORCE applied its diverse coalition of law enforcement and education leaders, treatment and other health care providers, behavioral and recovery specialists, advocates, and a broad spectrum of volunteers, many of them people in recovery.

Crucially, the fact that Yavapai County was mostly rural was regarded by MATFORCE members not as a weakness, but a strength.

"I've worked at federal, state, and county levels, and my experience is that the smaller the community, the more effective it is," said Ms. Polk. "There is a strong sense of accountability in Yavapai County, and that's a huge asset. People really care about trying to improve things in the community."

Commander James Edelstein of the Prescott Valley, Arizona, Police Department, who liaises with MATFORCE and the OFR Board, agreed: "Relationships are closer and

more trusting. The fact that we're a rural community requires us to work more often and more effectively to share resources. There's not a chief or deputy chief [in the county] that I don't have a phone number for."



Responding to Fentanyl: The Value of Partnerships and Data

After an initial awareness campaign about underage drinking proved successful and earned the organization substantial goodwill in the county, MATFORCE's emphasis on collaboration was tested anew during the years 2015–2019 as heroin and fentanyl began to flood into Yavapai County, causing 42 overdose deaths in Prescott Valley alone. In fall 2015, the county convened a planning session to address the problem, at which a Prescott Valley law enforcement officer who had heard about the pioneering [OFR program in Maryland](#) broached the idea of establishing one in Yavapai County. Ms. Polk, the county medical examiner, and other stakeholders reached out to the Maryland program for guidance; in short order, the Yavapai County OFR Board was in place and started reviewing overdose cases in August 2016.

The goal of the OFR Board was straightforward: to prevent overdose deaths by identifying overdose trends in Yavapai County and commonalities among deaths; making recommendations based on board findings; and developing action steps to improve policies and programs to prevent future deaths. This would be accomplished by reviewing selected, unintentional overdose cases through an examination of medical examiner reports, police reports, mental health histories, medical histories, and legal histories of decedents.

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Catching Up With COSSUP, December 2023

The OFR Board's ability to get up and running so quickly was in part due to the fact that it was drawing on the coalition that MATFORCE had already put in place, several members of which also assumed roles on the board. In addition to MATFORCE staff members, the OFR Board includes representatives from the following:

- Arizona Attorney General's Office
- Arizona HIDTA
- Community Health Center of Yavapai
- Cottonwood Police Department
- Medical Behavioral Hospital of Northern Arizona
- National Alliance on Mental Illness
- Northern Arizona University
- Northern Arizona Veterans Affairs Health Care System
- Prescott Fire Department
- Prescott Valley Police Department
- Recovery in the Pines Treatment Center
- Southwest Behavioral and Health Services
- Yavapai-Apache Nation
- Yavapai College
- Yavapai County Adult Probation
- Yavapai County Community Health Services
- Yavapai County Juvenile Justice Center
- Yavapai County Medical Examiner's Office
- Yavapai County Public Defender's Office
- Yavapai County Sheriff's Office
- Yavapai Family Advocacy Center
- Yavapai Regional Medical Center

As well as decedents' histories, often augmented by next-of-kin interviews designed to fill out the arc of victims' drug use, employment and educational backgrounds, and family dynamics, the board's monthly meetings equipped members with new levels of data. "That's the beauty of [the OFR Board]," said Ms. Fowler. "That's one of the ways we identify trends."

"We appreciate the toxicology reports, we appreciate the family interviews, we get to see the substances involved—that's the value of the data," said Doug Dolan, Chief Operations Officer of Recovery in the Pines Treatment Center and an OFR Board member. "It's about looking to the future, trying to get information about what's going on in other areas so that we can watch the shifts and stay out in front of them."

Added Paul Smith, a longtime Yavapai County pharmacist and OFR Board member, "Without the data, there



Doug Dolan, Chief Operations Officer of Recovery in the Pines

wouldn't have been the public recognition of how lethal fentanyl was. The community has to see what the trends are, because we all have a stake in this. That's the role of the data."

For Ms. Polk, the data provided county stakeholders with a bridge from abstract concern to concentrated action that would inform the allocation of resources and policy choices. And that instrumentality was made all the more critical by the fact of Yavapai County's rural nature.

"It's not *just* about identifying trends, but determining what to do about them. And that's why we have everyone come to the table," she said. "Because, when you're looking at data, you're looking at people's lives—at the obstacles they faced to getting help—and trying to plug efforts into saving other lives."

As Mr. Dolan said of the OFR Board's efficacy, "I want to waste no time on ineffective committees. I want to identify problems and get to solutions."

Having conducted 98 in-depth case studies since 2016, the OFR Board assembled a list of commonalities among decedents that would inform its action plan. As described in the annual report, of the decedents:

- 59 percent had reported a mental illness.
- 51 percent had spent time in jail or prison.
- 49 percent had received outpatient treatment for substance use, and 58 percent inpatient treatment.
- 52 percent had a family history of substance use.
- 51 percent had been prescribed an opioid by a doctor at some time.

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Catching Up With COSSUP, December 2023

Armed with these data and thereby improved profiles of overdose decedents, the [Substance Abuse Coalition Leaders of Arizona](#) (SACLaz), a MATFORCE project funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Coalition (SAMHSA), set about implementing OFR Board recommendations to enhance naloxone distribution and education and launch a fentanyl awareness campaign, with the goal of reducing overdose deaths among teenagers in Yavapai County.

A Naloxone Blitz

In short order, most school nurses in the county were provided with naloxone and trained in its administration by SACLaz member organizations, a process eased by a recent state statute allowing its presence on-site.

The infographic is divided into three main sections. On the left, a red and yellow banner reads "IF THE OPPORTUNITY PRESENTS ITSELF" and "SAVE A LIFE" with a large upward-pointing arrow. Below this, it says "REVERSE AN OVERDOSE" and features the MATFORCE logo. The middle section, titled "How to Use Naloxone", lists six steps: 1. Remove nasal spray from box, 2. Open the packaging, 3. Hold the nasal spray with your thumb on the bottom of the plunger and your first and middle fingers on either side of the nozzle, 4. Insert the tip of the nozzle in either nostril, 5. Press the plunger firmly to give the dose, 6. If no reaction in 2-3 minutes or person stops breathing again, give second dose in OTHER nostril using a new device. It includes two small diagrams showing the correct way to hold the spray. Below the steps, it says "Stay with the person. Naloxone loses its effect in 30-40 minutes and the symptoms may return. The combination of you and naloxone can help save lives in our community." The bottom section, titled "How to Respond to an Overdose", lists six steps: 1. Call 9-1-1 immediately, 2. Ask LOUDLY, "Are you ok?", 3. Perform a sternal rub, 4. Check for signs of breathing, 5. Administer naloxone, 6. Perform CPR until professional help arrives. On the right, a yellow box titled "The Naloxone Leave Behind Program is sponsored by" displays a grid of logos for various law enforcement agencies, including Yavapai County Sheriff's Office, Yavapai County Police, and several municipal police departments.

Yavapai County School Superintendent Tim Carter, who oversees a system of 25 school districts and 28,000 students, confirmed that "most schools now have naloxone and a person to administer it—and there have been situations where it's been used. The education around naloxone has really caused [substance] users to be cautious."

And in March, while waiting for U.S. Food and Drug Administration approval of over-the-counter availability of naloxone, Yavapai County's Partners Against Narcotics Trafficking (PANT), in coordination with MATFORCE and the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), [announced](#) that it was about to begin the "Naloxone Leave Behind" program, whereby law enforcement will leave naloxone with people when responding to suspected overdoses and when serving narcotics-related search warrants.

Fentanyl Awareness Campaign Targets Youth

If anything, the fentanyl awareness campaign was even more of an all-hands-on-deck effort. Working from a baseline of relative ignorance of fentanyl among Arizona youth (the 2022 Arizona Youth Survey [reported](#) that more than one-third of students [37.8 percent] said they had never heard of it), MATFORCE and its coalition members leveraged DEA's considerable resources under [Operation Engage](#) to blanket Yavapai County with billboards and televised public service announcements using DEA's One Pill Can Kill and Killer Among Us messaging. SACLaz also widely shared a [toolkit](#) (contributed to by Arizona HIDTA, among others), as well as its own messaging.

As a result, 163,470 doses of naloxone were distributed in Arizona through state opioid response grants and a substance abuse block grant in Fiscal Year 2022. [According to the Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System](#), "the increase is directly attributable to the increased community-based distribution efforts." And [Sonoran Prevention Works](#) reported an increase in referral traffic of 16.5 percent and a 151 percent increase in website traffic to [NaloxoneAZ.com](#) between 2021 and 2022 and 2022 and 2023. In addition, Southwest Recovery Alliance reported an uptick in the distribution of harm reduction supplies, including naloxone distribution to people who do not use drugs, which indicates increased awareness and interest of naloxone among community members.

One Pill Can Kill

The Drug Enforcement Administration warns the American public of the alarming increase in the lethality and availability of fake prescription pills containing fentanyl and methamphetamine. International and domestic criminal drug networks are mass-producing fake pills, falsely marketing them as legitimate prescription pills, and killing unsuspecting Americans.

These counterfeit pills are easy to purchase, widely available, and often contain deadly doses of fentanyl. Pills purchased outside of



Overdose Fatality Review Board in Rural Arizona a Blueprint for Success in Combating Substance Use

Catching Up With COSSUP, December 2023



The result? Superintendent Carter said that MATFORCE “has had a lot to do with increasing fentanyl awareness” among youth in Yavapai County. “The campaign has been well received, and there is reason to believe it has been successful in reducing the use and effects of drugs.”

Furthermore, Superintendent Carter said that MATFORCE’s approach had earned the attention of other counties in Arizona and beyond, resulting in requests for guidance and informational presentations. “That’s because MATFORCE has evolved over the years, just as issues such as fentanyl and programs for young people have evolved. Something that big [fentanyl] impacts the entire state, so other counties are using Yavapai County as an example,” he said.



Yavapai County Superintendent Tim Carter

The OFR Board recommendations in the 2023 annual report show that MATFORCE has no choice but to continue to evolve—ongoing and new challenges such as the correlation between substance use and mental illness, stigma, rising overdose deaths among older residents, and the emerging threat of ‘huffing’ (inhaling fumes from household products) have moved into the on-deck circle—but if any organization is well positioned to achieve success, it is MATFORCE.

“When a group like MATFORCE dedicates its time and energy, plus volunteers and their relationships with citizens, to get a good picture of what’s happening *and* is able to compare data—that’s a huge strength,” said Superintendent Carter. “They’re amazing.”