

# State Opioid Response (SOR) Grant Initiatives



## Effective Opioid Use Disorder Initiatives for Young Adults

### Introduction

The State Opioid Response (SOR) grant is administered by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to provide resources to states and territories to address the opioid overdose crisis by supporting the continuum of prevention, treatment, and recovery support services for opioid use disorder (OUD). The SOR program also supports the continuum of care for stimulant misuse and use disorders, including for cocaine and methamphetamine. The grant program aims to help reduce unmet treatment needs and opioid-related overdose deaths across America.

### Purpose and Background

Young adulthood (ages 18-25) is a developmental stage marked by rapid transitions—leaving home, pursuing education, starting work, and shifting social networks—that can shape patterns of opioid use and utilization of substance use disorder (SUD) services. Often referred to as transitional-aged youth, this population faces unique developmental, social, and environmental challenges that require tailored approaches across the continuum of care.

Research underscores the importance of prevention, as more than half (52%) of adults admitted to SUD treatment in 2017 reported initiating substance use before age 18, and nearly 9 in 10 had started by age 25.<sup>1</sup> Young adults remain especially vulnerable to substance misuse and SUD: the 2024 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) found that nearly half (45.8%) of individuals ages 18–25 experienced either a SUD or any mental illness in the past year, with 13.3% experiencing both.<sup>2</sup> Young adults have the highest prevalence of OUD among age groups. They have faced steep increases in opioid-related deaths since 1999 and show higher relapse rates and lower treatment retention rates compared to adults over 25. According to the 2024 NSDUH, about 1.0% of young adults (335,000) met criteria for OUD, while 2.7% (955,000) misused prescription pain relievers, highlighting the urgent need for tailored strategies across the prevention, treatment, and recovery continuum.<sup>3</sup>



Services for young adults must be developmentally appropriate, holistic, and delivered in ways that align with their daily realities, preferences, and environments. Effective approaches extend beyond clinical care and include prevention, education, and recovery supports that are accessible where young adults live, learn, and connect. This can include school- and campus-based education, peer-led outreach, family-centered prevention and therapy, evidence-based psychosocial interventions, access to medications for opioid use disorder (MOUD), and recovery support services designed specifically for this age group. By integrating these elements, services can meet young adults where they are and ensure that interventions are individualized, effective, and responsive to both immediate and long-term goals.

This brief provides an overview of primary prevention, overdose prevention, treatment, and recovery support strategies to address misuse of opioids and OUD among young adults. The strategies covered in this document are:

- Opioid Prevention Education on College and University Campuses
- Naloxone Education and Availability
- Access to SUD Treatment That Includes MOUD
- Recovery Support Services Tailored to Young Adults

State examples are included for each strategy, describing how they have implemented services for young adults. Key learnings on OUD services for young adults, as well as considerations for state officials, policymakers, and relevant organizations are also shared in the brief.

## Common Strategies and State Examples of Initiatives for Young Adults

This section describes key strategies and examples of state initiatives implemented with SOR funding to provide opioid-related services for young adults across the continuum of care.

## Opioid Prevention Education on College and University Campuses

Education is a core component of primary prevention and is important in increasing knowledge and awareness and building skills. Young adulthood is time of high stress and new experiences, and many students are exposed to or use drugs, including opioids, for the first time during college. According to the 2022 College Prescription Drug Survey, over a quarter of students who reported misusing opioids began their misuse during college.<sup>4</sup> College students may use opioids to get high, relieve pain, or relieve anxiety. This makes college campuses a key setting for opioid prevention efforts.

It is important for all members of a campus community to understand the risks of using opioids and how to prevent misuse. Students, faculty, and campus staff can all benefit from understanding available campus, state, and federal resources for prevention programming and how to identify the signs of misuse among the campus population. By educating all individuals that live and work on campuses, colleges and universities can become safer and healthier environments.

### Missouri Partners in Prevention and MoSafeRX

Partners in Prevention (PIP) is a coalition of over 20 public and private colleges and universities in Missouri. PIP provides training and educational resources to address substance misuse and related issues aimed at creating healthy and safe college campuses. PIP develops and provides self-paced and live trainings, research briefs and reports, and prevention toolkits on substance use and mental health topics.

SOR funds support PIP's MoSafeRx, an opioid misuse prevention program focused on prescription pain medications. This initiative provides training and education to students, faculty, and staff on college and university campuses on risks of prescription drug/opioid misuse, prevention resources, and medication safety. MoSafeRX also educates on how to recognize signs and respond to an overdose and provides information on Missouri's Good Samaritan Law, which seeks to reduce fears about police involvement during an overdose or medical emergency by offering protection and immunity to both the individual calling for help and the person experiencing the overdose or medical emergency.

Between October 2024 and August 2025, 826 young adults were served directly through PIP's outreach and education/training on campuses; 19 presentations were delivered on college campuses; and 47 individuals completed the MoSafeRx online training program.

## Naloxone Education and Availability

Providing education on and access to naloxone is a core component of overdose prevention. Research has shown that exposure to naloxone training increases college students' knowledge about opioid overdose.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, incorporating naloxone education and training into campus health initiatives can be an effective way of preventing overdoses and making campuses safer and healthier. Providing education on naloxone can decrease stigma and increase individuals' confidence in recognizing the signs of an overdose, administering naloxone, and calling 911.<sup>6</sup>



In addition to education and awareness of naloxone, it is important to provide access to this life-saving medication. Having naloxone readily available on campuses removes barriers to accessing the medication and allows a quick response time. Students, campus police departments, faculty, administrators, and all campus staff can help prevent overdoses by having access to naloxone and confidence to safely administer it.

## Arkansas Collegiate Network (ACN) and Collegiate NARCAN Campaign

The Arkansas Collegiate Network (ACN) is a coalition of students, faculty, and staff working to create healthier campuses and address substance misuse and overdose through intercollegiate communication and resources. Using SOR funds, the ACN has engaged in activities to prevent campus overdoses by training campus police departments, college administrators, faculty, and students to administer naloxone.

Arkansas' Collegiate NARCAN Campaign is an initiative aimed at promoting overdose prevention awareness and increasing naloxone availability on college campuses throughout the state. The Collegiate NARCAN Campaign has two phases of implementation. The first phase of the campaign aims to promote social awareness of naloxone through digital media and a free training module. The second phase seeks to increase naloxone availability by providing NARCAN Boxes to campuses, especially campuses with collegiate recovery programs and institutions with high rates of opioid overdose, as identified by the ACN. The boxes contain two doses of naloxone,

instructions for use, personal protective equipment such as gloves, a mask for rescue breathing, and information about community treatment resources.

These naloxone education and distribution efforts were supported by the passage of Arkansas Act 811, which requires all public high schools and state-supported universities to provide overdose reversal kits.

## Access to SUD Treatment That Includes Medications for Opioid Use Disorders

The availability of SUD treatment for young adults is often limited, and many factors further contribute to the underutilization of services by young adults. MOUD and counseling are recommended treatments for OUD in young adults by the American Academy of Pediatrics.<sup>7</sup> However, many young adults with OUD do not initiate MOUD treatment due to barriers including lack of capacity in the treatment system and



misconceptions and stigma around MOUD.<sup>8</sup> Some medical providers also do not feel prepared to prescribe medications to adolescents and young adults.<sup>9</sup> Access to MOUD treatment can be improved through tailored outreach and building the capacity and knowledge of treatment providers to offer MOUD to young adults. It is important for young adults to feel comfortable seeking treatment and for providers to have the funding, knowledge, and capacity to support young adults through the treatment process.

## California Youth Opioid Response

The California Youth Opioid Response (YOR) Project seeks to increase capacity and access to prevention, treatment, and recovery services, along with increasing access to MOUD for youth and their family members. YOR California provides two-year grants to organizations to support the implementation and expansion of MOUD efforts and services across the substance use continuum. Selected projects may directly provide treatment services or focus on capacity building to increase access to services.

Grantees offer outreach events and drop-in centers to engage youth, young adults, and



their families in programming. As of 2024, 1,130 new patients initiated MOUD through the project since SOR I.

## Recovery Support Services Tailored to Young Adults

Recovery support services for young adults aim to address their holistic needs throughout the four dimensions of recovery—health, home, purpose, and community.<sup>10</sup> For health, young adults require services to promote physical wellbeing, through preventative care and treatment services for acute and chronic conditions, including the provision of medications for OUD and other medical conditions. For home, young adults need a safe and stable living environment,



such as recovery homes. For purpose, young adults should receive recovery supports that encourage them to participate in society in meaningful ways, including vocational or educational support. Finally, for community, young adults need supports that help strengthen their family and peer relationships and social networks. These holistic recovery support services can help young adults navigate their unique and complex needs in all aspects of their lives and recovery.

## Maryland Recovery Residences for Young Adults (Ages 18-26)

Maryland uses SOR funding to support recovery homes specifically designed for young adults aged 18 to 26 that address the four dimensions of recovery. These recovery homes provide stable housing for young adults for 6 to 15 months and facilitate access to MOUD services. Young adults who are currently receiving MOUD or express interest in beginning MOUD are eligible to live in recovery homes. In addition to supporting MOUD services and stable housing, the recovery residences provide recovery support services including coordination of care, assistance with establishing linkages to vocational and educational support services, and transportation.

# Key Learnings & Future Considerations

This section briefly describes key learnings and considerations for state officials, policymakers, and relevant organizations in providing OUD prevention, treatment, and recovery services for young adults.

- 1. Provide young adults with prevention, treatment, and recovery services that are developmentally appropriate and support their unique needs and interests.** The transitional nature of young adulthood requires additional consideration and support of the developmental, social, and environmental factors impacting this population. It is important to reach young adults in spaces they readily access, like on college campuses.
- 2. Leverage partnerships to increase the reach and effectiveness of services.** Collaborations with community coalitions, healthcare providers, colleges and universities, and law enforcement can help strength prevention, treatment, and recovery efforts aimed at addressing opioid-related issues among the young adult population.
- 3. Continue supporting primary prevention and overdose prevention efforts.** Young adulthood is a key time to prevent opioid misuse and OUD. Increasing education and awareness on prescribed and illicit opioids, as well as supporting naloxone education and distribution efforts and policies can help prevent overdose deaths and injuries among this population. Policy and legislative changes can also support and encourage education and access to naloxone. Legislation can expand access to naloxone by broadening who may receive it, making it easier to obtain it, and expanding how naloxone is distributed.
- 4. Increase access to treatment services, including MOUD.** SUD treatment is currently underutilized by young adults. Increasing awareness of treatment services, including MOUD, is necessary to intervene with this critical age group. Age-appropriate outreach and engagement activities are needed to target young adults, their parents, and caregivers. Capacity building and financial assistance is also needed to equip treatment organizations with the skills and services to keep young adults engaged (e.g., family-centered services, digital supports).
- 5. Provide holistic recovery support services for young adults.** Recovery support services should address an individual's health, home, purpose, and community. Recovery support services for young adults should include recovery housing, care coordination, recovery coaching, vocational support, educational support, and other relevant social services.

## References

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**About the Opioid Response Network (ORN):** The SAMHSA-funded *Opioid Response Network (ORN)* assists states, organizations, and individuals by providing the resources and technical assistance (TA) they need locally to address the opioid crisis and stimulant use. TA is available to support the evidence-based prevention, treatment, and recovery of OUD and StUD. To ask questions or submit a request for TA, visit [www.OpioidResponseNetwork.org](http://www.OpioidResponseNetwork.org)

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