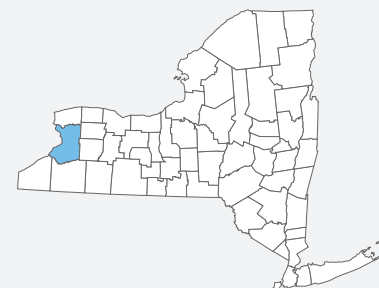


Erie County, N.Y.

# Opiate Epidemic Task Force



Under the direction of Dr. Gale Burstein, Commissioner of Health, and Michael Ranney, Commissioner of Mental Health, Erie County established its Opiate Epidemic Task Force in January 2016 under Executive Order #014. The idea for the Opiate Epidemic Task Force stemmed from an earlier convening of justice and health stakeholders, the Heroin Forum, which took place in Erie County in 2013. As the misuse of opioids has evolved, the county has worked collaboratively with local agencies, law enforcement, hospitals, community-based treatment providers and community members to develop and implement strategies to prevent overdoses.

The task force meets quarterly, usually with more than 100 attendees, to discuss updates, emerging issues and new opportunities for the task force's workgroups.

## The task force is divided into seven workgroups that represent stakeholders in the local opiate crisis:

- Provider Education and Policy Reform Community Education led by Dr. Gale Burstein
- Families and Consumer Support Advocacy led by parent advocate Deb Smith
- The Rapid Evaluation Appropriate Placement (REAP) Initiative led by the New York-New Jersey High Intensity Drug Trafficking (HIDTA) office
- Treatment Providers led by Mental Health Consultant of Mental Health Michael Ranney
- Hospitals and Emergency Rooms led by Dr. Joshua Lynch from the University of Buffalo Jacobs School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences
- Naloxone Access led by the Erie County Department of Health

This series of briefs highlights innovations happening in Erie County, New York, the site of a recent peer exchange for the Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Abuse Program (COSSAP) grantees. Erie County was selected as the site of this peer exchange due to its comprehensive and collaborative approach to addressing the opioid crisis.

The misuse of opiates became a growing public health and justice issue in Erie County, in the 2010s. In 2016, the county of 925,000 people experienced 301 opiate overdose deaths. Opiate painkillers were the number one prescribed drug in the county in 2012, topping 80,000 prescriptions. This, along with the closing of two major substance abuse treatment clinics in Erie County in 2013, led County Executive Mark Polancarz to declare a public health crisis and task county and other local leadership with finding solutions to save lives. Since 2016, **the county has invested over \$1.7 billion** of county, state, federal and grant funding in developing an array of interventions **to curb the number of opiate-related deaths and connect county residents to treatment.**

The workgroups were created by stakeholders with specialized experience and focus on developing strategies to effectively address opioid misuse in Erie County. The workgroups develop strategy proposals for government consideration and funding. Once approved, the workgroup oversees the implementation of the identified strategy, monitors results and reports out to the rest of the task force.

The workgroups have created numerous initiatives that have connected individuals to treatment, educated the community and fostered relationships between county administration, law enforcement, health practitioners and the community. For example, the Treatment Providers group has coordinated Crisis Intervention Training (CIT) and assisted with implementing substance use disorder treatment services in the Erie County Jail, including a Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) based program. The Treatment Providers group also implemented Service Link Stops, which connect individuals released from jail to community-based behavioral health resources as they reenter the community. The Naloxone Access workgroup provided training to over 634 community members in 2019 and implemented a naloxone emergency box program that placed 500 boxes with naloxone in public venues, such as bars and restaurants, throughout the county.



Educating the community about opiates and reducing stigma about people with opioid use disorders is a major component of the task force's mission. The Community Education and Prevention workgroup facilitates trainings, forums, resource fairs and panels to provide guidance and direction to those directly and indirectly affected by the opioid crisis. The workgroup also creates pamphlets for the public that provide information on topics such as available treatment services, how to prevent overdoses and how to provide support for a loved one with an opioid use disorder. This workgroup also works closely with local media outlets to provide guidance on the narrative of the opiate crisis including imagery and messaging on recovery, hope and reducing stigma for people with opioid use disorders.

Deb Smith, who lost her son Nathaniel Smith to an opiate overdose in 2015, leads the Families and Consumer Support Advocacy workgroup. This workgroup lobbies and advocates on behalf of those affected by opiates to improve the delivery of treatment

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## The Naloxone Access workgroup under the Erie County Opiate Epidemic Task Force provided **training to over 634 community members in 2019.**

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services. Their platform includes calls for more affordable treatment services, data-centric strategies and legal consequences for illegal opiate dealers. The workgroup originally lobbied the New York state legislature to support responses to the opiate crisis. This appeal led Erie County Executive Poloncarz to secure additional funding, resources and staff for the task force. The group of family advocates also works to eliminate the stigma of opiate addiction and to put faces to the crisis by sharing their own and their loved ones' challenges with opioid misuse. By sharing their experiences and memories of their loved ones, the group hopes to humanize the issue by showing how opiates have directly impacted their community and provide a support network for individuals coping with loss.

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