

October 16, 2024



The Center for Rural Pennsylvania  
625 Forster St  
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Dear Chairman Yaw and Members of The Center for Rural Pennsylvania,

### Commissioners

Christian Y. Leinbach, *Chair*  
Michael S. Rivera, *Vice Chair*  
Dante Santoni, Jr

### Officers

Courtenay Dillard  
*President*

Jeffrey Auman  
*Vice President*

Josephine Torres-Boykins  
*Secretary*

Wynton Butler  
*Treasurer*

Kathleen F. Noll  
*Executive Director*

I am writing today as a representative of the Council on Chemical Abuse (COCA) to provide testimony regarding the substance use crisis in Berks County and our agency's ongoing efforts to address this critical problem. Substance use, particularly opioid use, has acutely impacted Berks County; in response, COCA has implemented several key initiatives to support prevention, treatment, and recovery services for affected individuals.

COCA has served as the Single County Authority for drug and alcohol programming in Berks County since 1971. Our agency plays a vital role in providing prevention, intervention, treatment, and recovery services to individuals and families affected by substance use disorders. Our organization administers state and federal funding, including the Berks County opioid settlement funds, which we direct toward community-based initiatives addressing the opioid crisis. Through a comprehensive approach that includes public education, harm reduction, and recovery support, COCA works closely with community partners to mitigate the impact of substance use and promote lasting recovery.

### Overview of the Opioid Crisis in Berks County

Berks County has experienced significant challenges related to substance use, particularly opioid use, over the past several years. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Survey on Drug Use and Health indicate that more than 9,000 Berks County residents suffer from a substance use disorder, resulting in a severe social, emotional, and economic toll on our community. The Pennsylvania Department of Health's Office of Drug Surveillance and Misuse Prevention estimates that every two hours, a Pennsylvanian dies from a drug overdose. According to data obtained from the Berks County Coroner's Department, we have experienced nearly 800 overdose fatalities in our area since 2018. Although we are seeing a decrease in the number of overdose deaths this year, the devastating effects of these losses on families and the community are immeasurable. The average age of overdose victims is around 48 years old; however, we have records of overdose deaths starting from infancy through 94 years old. We have also seen an alarming increase in the number of Fentanyl- and Xylazine-related overdose deaths in our county. Between January and June 2024, more than 70% of overdose deaths involved Fentanyl, while one-third of fatal overdoses involved Xylazine. In addition to fatalities, we have seen a surge in the

number of emergency department visits for drug overdose, as high as 11.7 per 10,000 population in 2021 compared to 9.3 per 10,000 for Pennsylvania overall.

There are significant racial disparities among those afflicted with these disorders. For example, the rate of deaths per 10,000 county residents is significantly higher for the Black population, compared to other racial or ethnic groups. Furthermore, a recent study published by the peer-reviewed journal *Addiction*<sup>1</sup> indicated that Black males have 40-50% lower odds of receiving Narcan® (naloxone) compared to White and Hispanic males. And although the rate of overdose death is decreasing nationally, among Black males, the overdose rate is on the rise.

## County Initiatives and Programs

To combat this problem, we have undertaken a multi-faceted approach focusing on prevention, treatment, harm reduction, and recovery support. The key elements of our strategy include:

### 1. Prevention and Education Programs

COCA provides educational programs aimed at raising awareness about substance use risks, especially among youth. These initiatives include school-based programs, community outreach, and workshops on building resilience and promoting healthy behaviors. We have partnered with local schools, community organizations, and healthcare providers to launch educational campaigns to prevent opioid and other substance misuse through activities such as:

- **LifeSkills Training:** An evidence-based substance abuse and violence prevention program designed for classroom instruction.
- **Too Good for Drugs:** A comprehensive, evidence-based substance use prevention curriculum for students K-12, applying interactive, social games and activities to promote healthy decision-making.
- **Clear and Present Danger:** A two-part educational program about prescription medication safety. The program includes hands-on activities focused on teaching teens safe medication practices, the link between prescription drugs and heroin, as well as refusal skills.
- **Marijuana Education:** A highly interactive program that aims to build critical thinking skills in high school students by fostering discussions on marijuana and its potential consequences.

### 2. Treatment Programs

COCA plays a critical role in helping residents access treatment services. Activities include funding for inpatient and outpatient treatment, detox services, and medication-assisted treatment (MAT) for individuals struggling with opioid use disorder. We also provide funding for assessments and referrals to appropriate treatment providers. COCA has expanded access to treatment through the allocation of opioid settlement funds. Projects like Contingency Management and the use of the FDA-authorized Masimo Bridge™ device aim at improving

<sup>1</sup>Takemoto, E., Bolton, A., & Goetz, C. T. (2024). Inequities in naloxone administration among fatal overdose decedents by race and ethnicity in Pennsylvania, 2019–21. *Addiction*, 119, 1400-1409. DOI: 10.1111/add.16478

withdrawal management and transitioning individuals to medications for opioid use disorder. In addition, COCA has:

- Funded treatment services for more than 4,500 Berks County residents over the past five years.
- Increased the number of providers who offer opioid agonist medications to ensure timely access to care. These medications are evidenced-based interventions that improve survival rates for people with substance use disorders, increase retention in treatment, decrease illicit opiate use and other criminal activity, increase the ability to gain and maintain employment, and improve birth outcomes among women who have substance use disorders and are pregnant.
- Maintained the Warm Handoff Program to connect individuals with substance use disorders to comprehensive services, including counseling, inpatient and outpatient treatment, and peer support. Since 2021, the Warm Handoff Program has assisted more than 3,000 individuals with substance use concerns.
- Funded the Soft Landing program at Reading Hospital, which provides support to pregnant and postpartum women struggling with substance use. Since July 2023, 33 healthy babies have been born to mothers engaged in this program.

### **3. Harm Reduction Strategies**

To reduce opioid-related overdoses, COCA has implemented:

- **Naloxone Distribution:** Providing naloxone to first responders, families, and at-risk individuals. This medication can reverse an overdose caused by an opioid drug by blocking the effects of opioids on the brain and restoring breathing within two to eight minutes. Since 2021, COCA has distributed over 15,000 naloxone kits.
- **Fentanyl and Xylazine Test Strip Distribution:** These strips indicate if either Fentanyl or Xylazine is present in a drug supply before using the dose. These strips have been shown to reduce the spread of infectious diseases and connect individuals to treatment services.
- **Health to Go Vending Machine:** Health To Go is a community-based vending machine designed to dispense wellness items for free. SOS Berks has partnered with Penn State College of Medicine to bring a new Health To Go vending machine to Berks County. This machine dispenses Narcan® Opioid Overdose Reversal kits, Deterra® medication disposal bags, personal care items, wound care kits, condoms, pregnancy tests, drug checking strips, and many other health care items at no charge.

### **4. Recovery Support Services**

Recognizing that recovery is a long-term process, COCA offers various supports to help individuals maintain sobriety. This support includes recovery houses, recovery support groups, and peer support services. Sustained recovery from all substance use disorders is a primary focus of our efforts, which include:

- offering recovery housing for individuals who need safe, stable housing post-treatment. Since 2020, these homes have supported more than 700 individuals with a safe and supportive environment where residents in the early stages of recovery live together as a community. These homes connect individuals with necessary community services and serve as a bridge for individuals to long-term recovery.
- training peer recovery coaches. These certified specialists are recovering drug and alcohol peers who have dedicated themselves to helping others move into and through the recovery process. Since 2021, COCA has provided training to 135 certified recovery specialists.

## **5. Community Involvement**

Since 2016, COCA has helped lead the SOS Berks Opioid Coalition (SOS Berks). SOS Berks comprises Berks County community members who have joined together to reduce overdose deaths throughout the county. This group includes invested stakeholders who offer their time and talents to educate our community about substance use disorders, raise awareness about stigma, and provide information about the many resources available for prevention, treatment, and recovery. The coalition has spearheaded several mural projects, engaging over 1,000 community members to paint recover-themed murals on local buildings. Other activities have included recovery simulation events to help sensitize people to the challenges of early recovery, naloxone distribution, treatment and recovery information dissemination, and publication of the *Response* magazine. The *Response* covers issues related to the opioid epidemic and addiction prevention and recovery in Berks County. SOS Berks is also a central player in distributing naloxone to first responders and the community.

COCA also partners with the criminal justice system to provide treatment alternatives for individuals with substance use disorders who are involved in the legal system. Our partners include drug courts, diversion programs, and other criminal justice systems to promote treatment, prevent incarceration, and support incarcerated individuals upon re-entry to the community.

## **Results and Outcomes**

We are proud of our progress, though the work is far from over. Since launching these initiatives, COCA has achieved significant results through its comprehensive programs aimed at preventing and treating substance use disorders.

COCA's prevention programs have reached thousands of Berks County residents, particularly youth, through school-based education, community events, and outreach efforts. These initiatives have helped to increase awareness about the dangers of substance use and have contributed to reducing first-time drug use in the county.

COCA's efforts to connect individuals with treatment have been transformative. Hundreds of Berks County residents have been able to access much-needed inpatient and outpatient treatment services, detoxification programs, and medication-assisted treatment. Many individuals without access to care have received help thanks to COCA's financial assistance and referral services.

Recovery support programs have also led to measurable successes, with a growing number of individuals participating in peer support services and recovery housing programs. These efforts have significantly improved recovery rates, as participants benefit from community connections, stable housing, and ongoing peer support, all critical to maintaining long-term sobriety.

We have evidence that COCA's work with the Berks Opioid Coalition and its distribution of naloxone has directly contributed to a decline in opioid overdose deaths in Berks County. A 2023 study<sup>2</sup> of Pennsylvania community coalitions indicated that counties that developed coalitions avoided 1,818 opioid overdose deaths within two years following implementation. The wide availability of naloxone, along with education about its use, has saved numerous lives and empowered community members and first responders to reverse potentially fatal overdoses.

COCA's partnership with the criminal justice system has resulted in numerous individuals with substance use disorders receiving treatment instead of incarceration. This approach has helped reduce recidivism rates, allowing individuals to rebuild their lives through recovery rather than cycling through the legal system.

These outcomes reflect COCA's critical role in reducing substance use, improving access to care, and supporting recovery in Berks County. The success of these programs underscores the need for continued support to expand COCA's impact and address the ongoing substance use crisis.

## **Challenges and Needs**

COCA faces significant challenges in continuing its vital work, particularly as the landscape of healthcare funding has shifted following the end of the COVID-19 public health emergency. One of the most pressing issues is the increased demand for treatment services from individuals who have lost Medicaid coverage. With many individuals losing Medicaid eligibility, more people are now turning to COCA for financial assistance to access treatment for substance use disorders and opioid use disorders.

This sudden surge in service demand has immensely strained COCA's resources. While COCA has always been committed to providing treatment access regardless of an individual's ability to pay, the current funding levels are insufficient to meet the needs of those who rely on the Council due to the loss of Medicaid coverage. This gap in healthcare coverage is a direct result of the end of pandemic-era protections, leaving many vulnerable individuals at risk of not receiving the treatment they need to begin or continue their recovery journey. For example, this fiscal year, we have experienced a 23% increase in funding requests for residential treatment services from individuals who previously were Medicaid recipients. Consequently, our projected treatment expenditures for the current fiscal year have almost doubled.

Additionally, as the opioid epidemic persists, the demand for naloxone distribution, recovery support services, and long-term care for individuals with substance use disorders continues to grow. COCA's ongoing commitment to addressing these issues is critical, but without adequate funding, the Council may struggle to maintain its existing programs and expand them to meet the rising need.

<sup>2</sup>Cloutier, R. M., Aldridge, A., Hoffman, G., Boyd, K. L., Wang, E. H., Foster, K., ... & Pringle, J. L. (2023). Pennsylvania's community coordination strategy to reduce opioid overdose deaths. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 84(4), 605-614. <https://doi.org/10.15288/jsad.22-00205>

To continue its valuable work, COCA requires increased financial support to offset the costs of providing treatment for those without Medicaid coverage. The Council's ability to help the community combat the substance use crisis is dependent on securing the necessary funds to ensure that everyone who needs treatment can access it. The stakes are high, and without additional resources, many individuals in Berks County may be left without the life-saving treatment and support they need to overcome addiction.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, COCA remains deeply committed to addressing the opioid crisis and supporting individuals and families affected by substance use disorders. With continued support from the Pennsylvania General Assembly, we believe we can expand our efforts and improve outcomes for the people in our community.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony. I look forward to working together to further our collective mission of combating substance use and opioid disorders in Pennsylvania.

Sincerely,

*Kathleen F. Noll*

Kathleen Noll  
Executive Director  
Council on Chemical Abuse  
Reading, PA