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# Tech Talk: PAARI One2One Engagement to Recovery Program

Using Fentanyl Test Strips to Build Trust with People at Risk of Overdose

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Overdose deaths soared to a record 93,000 in 2020 during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).<sup>1</sup> That estimate overshadows the high of about 72,000 drug overdose deaths reached in 2019, amounting to a 29 percent increase. While prescription painkillers once drove the U.S. overdose epidemic, they were supplanted first by heroin and then by fentanyl, a dangerously powerful synthetic opioid that was developed to treat intense pain but has increasingly been sold illicitly and mixed with other drugs. From 2012 to 2018, the U.S. fentanyl overdose rate increased by 1,105 percent.<sup>2</sup>

Much of what is driving this surge in overdoses is a contaminated drug supply.<sup>3</sup> The CDC found that, between 2006 and 2015, there was an increased prevalence of heroin cut with fentanyl.<sup>4</sup> In recent years, drug dealers have expanded beyond cutting heroin with fentanyl; there have been more frequent reports of other illicit substances—like cocaine or methamphetamine—being cut with fentanyl and counterfeit pills being laced with synthetic opiates.<sup>5</sup> These trends highlight how important it is for people who use drugs (PWUDs) to know what they are putting in their bodies and avoid suffering an unintentional fatal overdose.

Fentanyl test strips (FTS) have emerged as an evidence-based, inexpensive, and easy method for PWUDs liquid, powder, or pill forms of drugs for the presence of this deadly opioid, providing the potential to help inform people with substance use disorders (SUD) about their risk of exposure. Research has shown FTS is an effective

tool for increasing self-efficacy and promoting safer substance use behavior.<sup>6</sup> As FTS gain public attention, practitioners in public health and public safety have begun to consider how they can use this tool to support PWUDs.

Police departments have been looking for ways to engage with individuals who have SUD to connect them to treatment and services. Since the Police Assisted Addiction & Recovery Initiative (PAARI) was founded in 2015, more than 700 police departments across the United States have joined this community-policing movement and launched programs that create new entry points to treatment and recovery.

Recently, PAARI posed the question, “Can an inexpensive technology be the catalyst for recovery-oriented conversations, contact, connections, and engagement between law enforcement and community members who use drugs?”

To find the answer, PAARI conducted a pilot program funded by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, with help from 11 Massachusetts police departments, to distribute FTS kits as a new tool to engage people with SUD and help prevent overdose deaths. PAARI hoped distributing the kits by officers and their community partners would help develop trust and build relationships with these individuals and foster one’s readiness for a referral to treatment.

***Law enforcement can be part of a system that helps people stay alive, even during a pandemic, in a way that is not complicated or expensive.***

The kit is built around inexpensive drug-testing technology to keep it affordable for police departments who adopt this method of engagement and to mitigate the impact of the opioid epidemic. PAARI has seen that expansion of support services is possible even during the most challenging of times. Law enforcement can be part of a system that helps people stay alive, even during a pandemic, in a way that is not complicated or expensive.

An evaluation of the program by Brandeis University showed that, despite several challenges posed by COVID-19 restrictions, the agencies participating in the pilot program were able to make approximately one referral to services for each FTS kit distributed. During the three months of the pilot, the 11 participating police departments and their community partners distributed 320 FTS kits and made 318 referrals to treatment and recovery support services. Data were collected for each of the departments, and evaluators selected six of the demonstration sites for a more rigorous process and outcome evaluation.

At the beginning of the pilot program, PAARI spoke with each of the 11 police departments about the value of using FTS kits as a community engagement tool, specifically to reach residents at risk of overdose. Buy-in varied by department at the beginning of the project, especially given that the project implementation began in March 2020, the same time as the COVID-19 closures. However, exit survey data from the six departments selected for more rigorous evaluation found promising results. By the end of the pilot program, a majority of exit survey respondents (89 percent) viewed FTS as a positive tool for engaging with PWUDs and generating referrals for treatment and other services.<sup>7</sup>

Building upon the pilot program, PAARI launched the project's second iteration, calling it the One2One Engagement to Recovery Program. In partnership with Brandeis University and funded by a Combating Opioid Overdose through Community-Level Intervention (COOCLI) grant from Washington/Baltimore HIDTA, the University of Baltimore, and the CDC, PAARI is working with 21 police departments in Massachusetts and Maine on the new project.

Some of the departments participating in the One2One Engagement to Recovery Program had previously participated in the pilot program. Having found value in distributing test strip kits in their communities, these departments served as champions during the second iteration of the program, helping to encourage buy-in from the new departments. To further obtain buy-in and promote peer-to-peer knowledge sharing, PAARI hosted monthly drop-in sessions and quarterly meetings for participating departments where officers and practitioners from sites convened

to discuss their programming, including challenges and ideas that can be replicated by other sites.

During the pilot program, police departments distributed FTS kits in bags that contained educational materials. However, in the program's second iteration, PAARI took steps to make the packaging more discreet. PAARI created a business card with instructions for using FTS and contact cards for each participating agency.

Departments were encouraged to add other items in the kits, and some included naloxone, the medication that reverses an overdose, gaining positive reception from those who received it. To reach non-English speaking residents, PAARI also created Spanish versions of all educational materials.

PAARI also developed several roll-call videos to support participating departments. These videos provided instructions on how departments can implement their FTS kit program, how to use the kit, and how to interpret results.

During the first nine months of the second iteration of the program, the 21 participating police departments and community partners distributed 2,276 FTS kits, provided 1,124 direct services to recipients, and made 1,641 referrals to treatment and recovery support services.

The FTS kits, when shared with community members by local law enforcement, led to increased recovery-oriented conversations and connections to recovery support services. The distribution of FTS was also beneficial because, when people understand the content of the substances they have possession of, they can make informed decisions about their use behavior, including whether to use and whether to use alone or in the presence of others. The test strips are used to detect the presence of fentanyl in drugs, but more importantly, they can help people change their use behavior, catalyze the development of trust, and help foster a person's readiness for a referral to treatment.

The FTS can be shared with individuals, families, and organizations in ways limited only by a police officer's imagination. They can be used to engage with people prior to an overdose as a prevention strategy or as part of post-overdose visits or street outreach. Even during the recent pandemic, these test strips can easily be distributed in accordance with the CDC safety guidelines. Some agencies left them

on a vehicle, met on people's front steps, and even mailed them to users. While most kits were given to people at risk for overdose, they were also given to friends and family members, which may empower conversations with loved ones.

Participating police departments received positive feedback from some of the individuals who used the kits. Some report changing their substance use behavior, and others report disposing of fentanyl-contaminated drugs. FTS kits proved to be an effective tool for community engagement and also had a positive impact on individuals who used the kits. ❤️

If your department is interested in learning more about replicating PAARI's One2One Engagement to Recovery Program, or any of the other programs we offer, please visit [paarius.org/one2one](https://paarius.org/one2one) or get in touch with us at [info@paarius.org](mailto:info@paarius.org) to learn more.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup>Farida B. Ahmad, Lauren M. Rossen, and Paul Sutton, *Provisional Drug Overdose Death Counts*, fig. 1a, "12 Month-Ending Provisional Number of Drug Overdose Deaths" (National Center for Health Statistics, 2021).

<sup>2</sup>National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics, "Fentanyl Abuse Statistics."

<sup>3</sup>Asha C. Gilbert, "Why Is Fentanyl so Dangerous? The Illicit Drug Has Ruined Lives during COVID Pandemic," *Health, USA Today*, October 23, 2021.

<sup>4</sup>Julie O'Donnell et al., "Trends in Deaths Involving Heroin and Synthetic Opioids Excluding Methadone, and Law Enforcement Drug Product Reports, by Census Region — United States, 2006–2015," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 66, September 1, 2017, 897–903.

<sup>5</sup>Brian Mann, "Overdose Deaths Surged in Pandemic, As More Drugs Were Laced With Fentanyl," NPR, April 22, 2021; U.S. Department of Justice, "Department of Justice Announces DEA Seizures of Historic Amounts of Deadly Fentanyl-Laced Fake

Pills in Public Safety Surge to Protect U.S. Communities," news release, September 30, 2021.

<sup>6</sup>Daniel Ciccarone, Jeff Ondocsin, and Sarah Mars, "Heroin Uncertainties: Exploring Users' Perceptions of Fentanyl-Adulterated and -Substituted 'Heroin,'" *The International Journal on Drug Policy* 46 (August 2017): 146–155; Maxwell Krieger et al., "High Willingness to Use Rapid Fentanyl Test Strips among Young Adults Who Use Drugs," *Harm Reduction Journal* 15, no. 7 (February 2018); Nicholas C. Peiper et al., "Fentanyl Test Strips as an Opioid Overdose Prevention Strategy: Findings from a Syringe Services Program in the Southeastern United States," *The International Journal on Drug Policy* 63 (January 2019): 122–128; Susan Sherman et al., *Fentanyl Overdose Reduction Checking Analysis Study* (Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, 2018); Susan G. Sherman et al., "Acceptability of Implementing Community-Based Drug Checking Services for People Who Use Drugs in Three United States Cities: Baltimore, Boston and Providence," *The International Journal on Drug Policy* 68 (June 2019): 46–53.

<sup>7</sup>Patricia Case et al., *Fentanyl Test Strip Kit Distribution Pilot Evaluation Report* (Brandeis University, 2020).

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