



The Healing Network
OF WALKER COUNTY
Together, We Heal as One

Multi-Year Strategic Plan

Updated December 2019

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Introduction & Overview

In recent years, opioid-related deaths have continued to increase throughout the country. Walker County's opioid use and abuse issues have made state and national headlines for their level of severity. As local and state officials have attempted to restrict access to opioids in Walker County, some substance users have reportedly switched to methamphetamines and/or heroin.

The number of mental health cases in the county is on the rise and some health officials associate this with the county's large drug problem. All of these issues have put strains on Walker County's legal justice system, its health care system, as well as local social service organizations.

The Walker County Health Action Partnership (WC-HAP) is a coalition of organizations committed to make Walker County a healthier place to live, work, and play. WC-HAP identified funding from the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) to support the development of a comprehensive response to the opioid and substance use crisis in Walker County. The grant, called the Rural Communities Opioid Response Program (RCORP) Planning grant, supported a strategic planning process. Local organizations met regularly to conduct a needs assessment, collect comprehensive data, and develop the multi-year strategic plan presented in this report. The coordination and collaboration supported by the grant is sustained through Health Action Partnership's priority group, The Healing Network of Walker County (formerly the Behavioral Health Priority Group).

The Network, and thus the development of this strategic plan, exist within the framework of **collective impact**. The strategic plan serves as a **common agenda** and a tool to ensure **shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities**, and **continuous communication**. The work is stabilized by four **backbone organizations**, in addition to other partners and stakeholders. The objectives and strategies were written with these guiding principles in mind, such that diverse interests and projects can align.

Finally, the Network is limited to tracking the actions of its voluntary members. The Network opted to include objectives and strategies even if it currently does not have the partner(s) to implement, with the understanding that thoughtful recruitment of new partners is necessary.

The Healing Network Participants

Participants are defined as having contributed to development and/or implementation of the strategic plan through interviews, data sharing, and/or attending Network meetings. Note: The list reflects activities through July 2021.

AIDS Alabama	University of Alabama
Alabama Department of Mental Health	Education, Nursing, Business & Team VitAL
Alabama Department of Public Health	UA-Birmingham, Center for AIDS Research
Alabama Bureau of Pardons & Parole	United Way of Central Alabama
Walker County Day Reporting Center Lite	U.S. Attorney's Office - Northern District
Alkermes	Walker Area Community Foundation
Alliant Quality	Walker Baptist Medical Center
Bevill State Community College	Walker County Commission
Bradford Health Services, Inc.	Walker County Courts (Drug, Veteran, Family Courts)
Capstone Rural Health Center	Walker County Department of Human Resources
Carbon Hill First United Methodist Church	Walker County District Attorney's Office
City of Lights (Sumiton Church of God)	Walker County Extension Office
Court Referral Office	Walker County Public Defender's Office
Desperation Church	Walker County Schools
Fellowship House	Walker County Sheriff's Office
The Foundry Ministries	Walker Women Specialists
Hope for Women	Whatley Health Services
Hope is the Anchor	Will Bright Foundation & Restoration Springs
Jasper City Schools	Youth Advocate Programs, Inc.
Jasper Police Department	
MyCare Alabama	
Northwest Alabama Mental Health Center	
Public Defender's Office	
Recovery Organization of Support Services (R.O.S.S.)	
Recovery Resource Center, a program of the Crisis Center	
Regional Paramedical Services	
Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham	
Self Recovery	
St. Mary's Episcopal Church	

Interested in joining The Healing Network of Walker County?
Contact the Network at info@hnwc.org or 205-724-9041.

Walker County's Epidemic in a Snapshot

Snapshot: Prevalence

- **While the prevalence of fatal overdoses decreases, it remains one of the highest in the state and nation. Non-fatal overdoses are more common in Walker County than any other county in Alabama, which is likely related to a high rate of Naloxone administration.**

An analysis of CDC data by 24/7 Wall St. includes unintentional overdoses, suicide, homicide, and undetermined causes, which elevated the drug-related death rate to 47.5 per 100,000. A local survey supports the decision to opt for a more inclusive drug-related death rate, where six out of ten residents, ages 18-39, knew someone who was using drugs and either completed or attempted suicide.

- **Risk of HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C in Walker County is high and interrelated with substance and opioid use disorders.**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention identified Walker County as the 37th most at-risk county in the United States for risk of HIV and Hepatitis C infections largely due to injection and drug use.

Snapshot: Consequences

- **Expectant mothers and infants in Walker County experience complications due to substance and opioid use disorders.**

In Walker County the infant mortality rate is nine per 100,000, which is higher than that of Alabama (7.4) and the United States (5.8) according to the CDC National Center for Health Statistics. It is unclear what portion of the rate is attributable to drug use. In 2018, forty-two expecting mothers, or 5%, had a positive drug screen. Of those cases, 24 infants (57%) were treated for withdrawal.

- **The child welfare system and family court in Walker County are significantly burdened by the substance and opioid use disorder.**

The Walker County DHR are seeing a huge increase in foster care because of opioid use. In early 2018 there were 40 in foster care in custody of DHR, compared to 126 in early 2019.

- **The opioid epidemic has harmed the workforce and employers' willingness to hire persons in recovery.**

Using FRED Economic Data analysis, the percentage of discouraged workers between the ages of 18-64 is 34.6%. In a survey with twenty local employers, only six reported having experience hiring someone in recovery; all six employers reported negative experiences related to scheduling around the employee's treatment and recovery needs.

Snapshot: Opioid Prescribing

- **The rate of opioid prescriptions in Walker County is one of the highest in the United States.**
From 2006-2012, 83.5 million opioid doses entered Walker County. That's 178 doses per person, per year. Four out of the top 10 Alabama cities and towns for opioid rates are in Walker County (Sumiton, Sipse, Dora, and Jasper).
- **The prevalence of chronic pain and/or disability pose a challenge to decreasing opioid prescribing.**
One-half of households have a least one person experiencing chronic pain. Twenty-five percent of residents have a disability status (U.S. Census). Without many alternatives to pain medications, or lack of resources to access what is available, there is great hesitancy to reduce prescribing beyond state and federal guidelines.
- **Risks of opioid prescription addiction is not widely understood.**
One-half of residents interviewed in a phone survey gave the cause of the opioid problem as high availability (prescribed too often, easy to get). Yet, one-half of residents stated they could prevent a family member from misusing and abusing opioids. Only four out of ten would seek help with opioid misuse at their regular doctor.

Snapshot: Treatment & Recovery

- **Barriers to pathway to treatment are awareness of available resources and poor perceptions of existing resources.**
Only three out of ten residents were aware of a substance use treatment facility for opioids in the county. Yet, six out of ten would seek help from such a facility if they or someone they knew needed help. Of those who knew about the existing programs, most rated the programs as either fair or poor.
- **Existing treatment & recovery programs cannot serve all who need support.**
Most resources are in the county's largest city, Jasper, which is not easily accessible by all in the county. Providers report needing more support and additional providers.
- **Faith-based groups are integral to the recovery network.**
They are responsible for most of the support groups and limited residential options. In interviews with twelve persons in recovery, eleven reported that God and their faith make recovery possible.

Snapshot: Criminal Justice

- **Law enforcement are important to recovery in Walker County.**

In interviews with twelve persons in recovery, eight reported that their involvement with law enforcement started them on the road to recovery due to forced sobriety, getting a wake-up call, or actual diversion (Drug Court).

- **Law enforcement in Walker County instituted deflection strategies in response to drug crimes and addiction.**

For persons arrested for drug crimes statewide, 16% were for sale of drugs and 84% were for possession. In Walker County, 25% were for sale of drugs and 75% were for possession. The Sheriff of Walker County has implemented a county-wide program aimed to connect individuals to recovery resources within 12 to 24 hours of contact.

Snapshot: Community Readiness

- **The community knows there is a crisis.**

All thirteen elected officials in the county rated the drug problem in Walker County from bad to severe. All conveyed heartbreaking effects, including the generational effects to come. All residents interviewed in a phone survey rate alcoholism, mental health, illegal drugs, and prescription opioids as very serious to somewhat serious problems.

- **More than half the community lacks empathy for those suffering.**

Four of ten residents are understanding of people with mental health issues; three of ten for people misusing opioids.

The Plan

Multi-Year Strategic Plan

Goal Improve community health of Walker County residents by creating a comprehensive network of prevention, intervention, treatment, and recovery resources related to mental and substance use disorders (SUD).

The objectives include:

- Objective 1** Community education on risks, harms, and resources
Educate Walker County residents and stakeholders on the risks of opioid use disorders and interrelated mental health issues, as well as effective prevention, treatment, and recovery options.
- Objective 2** Prevention and intervention by health professionals
Engage health professionals and organizations in the prevention and early intervention of substance use disorders among residents of the county.
- Objective 3** Equitable and timely treatment and recovery options
Ensure equitable and timely access to quality substance use disorder treatment and recovery support services.
- Objective 4** Community-led, life-long recovery support
Enhance citizen engagement toward a goal of a shared vision of understanding and commitment for solving the county's opioid and substance use crisis.
- Objective 5** Healthy lives for those affected by addiction
Reduce harm, including morbidity and mortality related to substance use and interrelated mental health issues.

Objective 1: Community education on risks, harms, and resources

Educate Walker County residents and stakeholders on the risks of opioid use disorders and interrelated mental health issues, as well as effective prevention, treatment, and recovery options.

- Strategy 1:** Enhance existing, age-appropriate evidence-based education in Walker County regarding the risks of illegal drug use, prescription drug misuse, related mental health issues, and safe disposal of medications.
- Strategy 2:** Train youth and adult educators to conduct education and outreach activities around mental health and substance use in school and community settings.
- Strategy 3:** Conduct outreach to school-based programs, summer camps, and churches to educate these groups on ways to engage/support students, friends and family who may need access to local resources and treatment services.
- Strategy 4:** Create and implement campaigns aimed at selected segments (youth, young adults, current users) to increase knowledge and awareness of substance use and related mental health issues, including prevention, treatment, and recovery resources.

Objective 2: Prevention and intervention by health professionals

Engage health professionals and organizations in the prevention and early intervention of substance use disorders among residents of the county.

- Strategy 1:** Look for opportunities to expand the use of the evidence-based practice, Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT), among agencies who conduct intake assessments.
- Strategy 2:** Create intake and crisis intervention sites in underserved communities, including mobile response teams that rapidly contact recent overdose survivors.
- Strategy 3:** Provide education to patients receiving opioid medications regarding the risk of addiction and misuse.
- Strategy 4:** Use provider-pharmacist collaborative proactive agreements to provide appropriate pain management to patients with chronic pain as well as palliative care patients.
- Strategy 5:** Ensure all licensed providers in Walker County permitted to prescribe/dispense controlled substances be required to register with a prescription drug monitoring program (PDMP).
- Strategy 6:** Encourage continuing education on evidence-based guidelines for the appropriate prescribing of medication-assisted treatment (MAT) and other relevant topics for addiction treatment providers and primary care providers.

Objective 3: Equitable and timely treatment options

Ensure equitable and timely access to quality substance use disorder treatment and recovery support services.

- Strategy 1: Form a taskforce of providers to develop a comprehensive plan that improves coordination among all providers.
- Strategy 2: Evaluate the effectiveness of programs providing medication assisted treatment (MAT) to identify opportunities for enhancing treatment and recovery.
- Strategy 3: Recruit more not-for-profit treatment providers that complete a continuum of care to Walker County to help those without insurance/those who cannot afford to pay for treatment.
- Strategy 4: Identify methods and models to increase the chances that clients will stay engaged with their treatment plan, which should include necessary recovery support services such as housing, transportation, and employment.
- Strategy 5: Expand and enhance criminal justice deflection and diversion programs that serve individuals with drug-related cases.

Objective 4: Community-led life-long recovery support

Enhance citizen engagement toward a goal of a shared vision of understanding and commitment for solving the county's opioid and substance use crisis.

- Strategy 1: Support a life-long recovery model and vision that fosters assimilation/re-assimilation.
- Strategy 2: Identify and implement solutions for barriers which limit the number of companies employing residents in recovery.
- Strategy 3: Work with every community to form its own committee, comprised of rotating members, with the goal to identify ways each has improved the lives of individuals dealing with substance use issues.
- Strategy 4: Plan and initiate a campaign to attract volunteers to assist indirect providers. (Indirect providers include entities that provide services or resources relevant to life-long recovery.)

Objective 5: Healthy lives for those affected by addiction

Reduce harm, including morbidity and mortality, related to substance use and interrelated mental health issues.

- Strategy 1:** Improve access to primary care, treatment for HIV and Hepatitis C, and programs addressing associated harms to improve health outcomes among people who use drugs.
- Strategy 2:** Increase access to harm reduction education to county residents, including naloxone distribution points.
- Strategy 3:** Use peers with lived experience to engage individuals with substance use disorders in harm reduction programs and services.
- Strategy 4:** Identify and fill gaps preventing local law enforcement efforts from using existing laws to reduce the supply of methamphetamines, heroin, and illegal opioids in Walker County.
- Strategy 5:** Identify and collect data that accurately identifies the prevalence of morbidity and mortality associated with substance use.
- Strategy 6:** Participate in local, regional, and state advocacy that promotes the use of harm reduction strategies.