



Homelessness and Substance Misuse: Five Ways Volunteers and Staff Can Reduce Harm

For people who are homeless or housing insecure, the constant need to find shelter, permanent housing, and compassionate care can be overwhelming, stressful, frightening, and dangerous. It's hardly surprising that this situation can lead a person to use or even become dependent on drugs or alcohol.

The good news is that it's possible to reduce the harm of substance misuse and help people who are homeless find a path to better health. And volunteers and staff serving organizations that provide emergency, transitional, and supportive housing are key sources of support.

"If you work with at-risk individuals, you should carry naloxone," said Carson McCall, Ph.D., an expert in addiction at the [Impact Wellness Network](#), a leading drug and alcohol treatment provider. "With it, you can save a life."

Here are five ways to save lives and promote recovery in clients who misuse substances or have a substance use disorder:

1. Take action to reverse an overdose.

In recent years, more than 100,000 people have died of a drug overdose. Opioids — particularly illegally manufactured fentanyl — contributed to the majority of these deaths. Overdoses often occur in people who accidentally take fentanyl-laced drugs.

[Naloxone \(aka Narcan\)](#) is a medication that restores breathing in a person experiencing an overdose. If someone who has taken drugs has slowed or stopped breathing or [shows other signs of an overdose](#), take action by:

- Calling 911.
- Administering [naloxone](#), a nasal spray or injectable medicine available at local pharmacies or community-based naloxone programs.
- Keeping the person awake and breathing and on their side until first responders arrive.

2. Provide education about harm reduction.

Help clients who misuse drugs limit their risk by urging them to:



- Use test strips to check if a drug supply contains the dangerous substances of fentanyl or xylazine.
- Use clean needles for injecting drugs and safely dispose of used needles.
- Avoid using substances alone — particularly opioids such as fentanyl or heroin or other drugs potentially laced with an opioid.
- Carry naloxone in case they or a friend has an overdose.

3. Offer drug use safety referrals and resources.

Refer clients to information, tools, and programs that promote safer drug use such as:

- [Opioid overdose prevention kits](#) that include multiple resources for safer drug use.
- [Syringe service programs](#), also known as needle exchange or syringe exchange programs, which reduce harm from substance use.
- Other [harm reduction supplies](#) that prevent the spread of infection, promote safe sex, and otherwise limit risk of drug use.

4. Find national, state, and local harm reduction services.

Explore additional harm reduction services from these organizations and programs:

- [National Harm Reduction Coalition](#).
- [National Harm Reduction Technical Assistance Center](#).
- [SAMHSA harm reduction grantees](#).

5. Help clients locate care and treatment.

Direct people seeking care and treatment for substance use to these recovery services:

- SAMHSA [National Helpline](#) for information and referrals to treatment.
- [Start Your Recovery](#) for nearby treatment, counseling, and support services.



- Support for veterans who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, available by phone at 877-4AID-VET (877-424-3838) and <https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS>.
- [Local and state homeless assistance](#) from the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Sources

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