

SPOTLIGHT: Burner Phone Initiative



Background

The City of Alexandria's Burner Phone Initiative works to divert people struggling with substance use disorders away from the criminal justice system and into treatment by providing those who experience a non-fatal overdose with a burner cell phone with the numbers of a detective and the City's treatment program pre-programmed into it. Alexandria Lieutenant Mike Kochis and Liz Wixson, Director of Clinical and Emergency Services/Department of Community and Human Services found a gap in connecting people revived from an overdose to treatment. Previously, detectives were handing out treatment referral cards to overdose survivors, but when they analyzed this approach, they found it was not effective in getting people into treatment, so they decided to try a new approach.

In 2015, the City of Alexandria created the Opioid Work Group composed of ten organizations such as Alexandria Fire Department, Alexandria Police Department, Alexandria City Public Schools, Commonwealth's Attorney's Office and other key community members. The Work Group is responding to the opioid crisis by focusing on five key areas to address addiction:

1. Prevention and Education: Educates the community about addiction and how to prevent substance use disorders.
2. Addiction Treatment: Connecting people before the event of an overdose to treatment and connecting those who have been revived from an overdose to reliable treatment.
3. Overdose response and recovery: Making Narcan as available as possible and getting it into as many hands as possible and offering overdose survivors and their families timely treatment and support services.
4. Diversion into Treatment: Expanding opportunities to divert people away from the criminal justice system and into treatment. This includes opportunities like a Treatment Court, the Burner Phone Initiative, and the City's Crisis Intervention Team (CIT), which trains

"One of the most effective approaches we've taken in Alexandria is to recognize that more often than not, it's law enforcement that first comes into contact with people in crisis, not the treatment system. Whether it's someone experiencing a substance use crisis or someone in need of mental health treatment, arming police officers with the information they need to divert people away from the criminal justice system and into the treatment system has been extraordinarily effective at reaching those most in need in our community."

- Liz Wixson, Director of Clinical and Emergency Services/Department of Community and Human Services for City of Alexandria

first responders so they can better understand what someone in crisis looks like and how to divert them from the criminal justice system and connect them with treatment.

5. Supply Reduction: Continued focus on distribution/investigation, conduct operational activities to disrupt street level narcotic use/dealing, and regularly tracking overdose incidents to monitor local trends in real time.

The Burner Phone Initiative falls under "Diversion into Treatment" and is designed to ensure more people struggling with substance use disorders are connected with reliable treatment instead of arrested.

Spotlight Series: A series to highlight innovative programs across the country that contribute to a comprehensive strategy to address addiction.

How It Works

The Burner Phone Initiative is designed to divert people who experience an overdose away from the criminal justice system and into treatment. Anyone in Alexandria who is revived from an overdose by a city official is taken to the hospital to recover, where a detective will meet them and exchange their personal cell phone with a burner phone. Burner phones are pre-programmed with the numbers of a detective and the City's substance use treatment program.

Patients with burner phones can use the device to reach out for help and to engage in treatment. When calling the treatment program number they will speak with a social worker about their substance use and treatment options. Even if patients do not pursue treatment, they are counseled about harm reduction and where to get free Narcan. Patients also use the phone to call the detective to discuss what drugs they took to help determine if the drug was tainted. The phones are also used by treatment staff who call to engage overdose survivors in treatment.

How It Is Innovative

It is important to provide multiple access points to treatment. The Burner Phone Initiative makes it easier for patients to find help when they are ready and ensures the person has a phone to make the call. The pre-programmed burner phone makes it simple for someone in crisis to find treatment when they are ready to engage. Within 48 hours of receiving a burner phone, patients get a phone call from a social worker at the treatment center if they have not already reached out for help.

When treatment staff reach out to patients with a burner phone, the City of Alexandria has a better chance of getting people at high risk into treatment. When someone in Alexandria overdoses but does not live in the city they do not get a burner phone, but the detective and social worker will still follow up to see how they are doing and refer them to treatment resources in their area.

The City of Alexandria tracks the locations of overdoses using the High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas (HIDTA) Overdose Map, which provides real-time tracking of the crisis. HIDTA allows the police department to see when there is a spike in overdoses. When there are spikes, the Police Department alerts the public that substances might be tainted, so to use carefully and get naloxone.

By tracking areas of overdoses and using the burner phones the City of Alexandria is able to reach those most vulnerable; people who previously had an overdose.

Demonstrating Success

The City of Alexandria has found success in their diversion efforts in the last six to nine months by connecting five people to treatment through their Burner Phone Initiative. When a detective shows compassion and a social worker reaches out to connect them to treatment, patients have a better chance of entering recovery. The quick response to patients in a crisis situation also ensures that an opportunity is not missed to connect an individual to treatment.

The Future of the Program

The City is now creating "Recovery Bags," small backpacks that contain a burner phone, treatment referral information, and medication disposal bags. These bags will be given to all overdose survivors by the detectives who meet with them.

The City of Alexandria is working hard to help family members know how to best support their loved ones and find support for themselves. The City is in the process of designing resource materials that detectives can share with family members after an overdose.

Families in crisis are desperate for resources and by providing them with the necessary tools, the City is closer to assisting more people in need.

To further engage families and overdose survivors, the City is investigating how to create an Overdose Response Team that would visit the home within 48 hours after an overdose. The team would be staffed by police, treatment staff, and a peer support specialist and would provide support to the person in crisis, let them know they are here to help, teach the patient and family how to use Naloxone, and provide a ride to treatment.

Stakeholders and Partners

This initiative involves numerous community members through the Opioid Work Group. The Work Group includes:

- Department of Community and Human Services
- Alexandria Fire Department

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- Alexandria Police Department
- Alexandria Sheriff's Office
- Alexandria City Public Schools
- Virginia Department of Corrections/Probation and Parole
- Commonwealth's Attorney's Office
- Alexandria Health Department
- Substance Abuse Prevention Coalition of Alexandria
- Inova Alexandria Hospital

Resources

<https://www.alexandriava.gov/dchs/adultservices/default.aspx?id=102183>