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Preventing Fentanyl Overdose Deaths in Akron, Ohio: A Community-Based Social Change Initiative

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COUN 6785: Social Change in Action:

Prevention, Consultation, and Advocacy

Social Change Portfolio

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OVERVIEW

Keywords: [Fentanyl Overdose Deaths in Akron, Ohio]

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Goal Statement: The goal for this Social Change Portfolio is to reduce the alarming number of fentanyl overdose deaths in Akron, Ohio, through prevention, education, and strengthened community support systems.

Significant Findings: This paper examines the high rate of fentanyl overdoses in Akron, Ohio, and how communities are deeply impacted by the opioid crisis, with fentanyl-related overdoses emerging as the leading cause of preventable death. Fentanyl, a synthetic opioid significantly more potent than heroin and morphine, has skyrocketed overdose fatalities both nationally and locally, with Summit County reporting overdose rates higher than national averages (County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, 2018). Lower-income families, minority groups, and younger adults suffer from increased rates of trauma, grief, family instability, and economic strain within the community (Parents Lead, n.d.). As highlighted in the Behavioral Health Continuum of Care Model, prevention efforts stress the importance of comprehensive strategies that move beyond treatment to include early education, harm reduction, and community engagement (Parents Lead, n.d.; Tucker, 2015).

Objectives/Strategies/Interventions/Next Steps

As counselors, educators, and prevention specialists, we can adopt evidence-based programs such as *LifeSkills Training* to equip individuals with coping skills, emotional

regulation, and resistance strategies against substance use. Partnering with Akron Public Schools and prevention providers can ensure early intervention among at-risk youth. We could also collaborate with certified peer recovery supporters to provide ongoing support to individuals struggling with opioid misuse in their families. We can advocate for naloxone distribution and training in communities that could provide life-saving doses of Narcan in times of need. We could draw on resources such as the OASIS database and county health rankings to monitor overdose trends, identify high-risk populations, and evaluate the effectiveness of prevention strategies. Data-driven decision-making ensures that interventions are both timely and targeted. And finally, we can provide family education sessions, grief counseling, and community forums to address the social and emotional ripple effects of overdose deaths.

INTRODUCTION

Preventing Fentanyl Overdose Deaths in Akron, Ohio: A Community-Based Social Change Initiative

Akron, Ohio, is facing a significant public health challenge similar to many cities across the United States that are grappling with the opioid crisis. The prevalence of drug misuse, particularly involving substances laced with fentanyl, has led to a disturbing rise in unintentional overdoses and fatalities. Recent data indicate that Akron, as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau, ranks among the most severely affected cities in Ohio. Moreover, Summit County has observed a marked increase in overdose incidents, highlighting the urgent need for effective prevention and intervention strategies tailored to the community's unique cultural context (Reese & Vera, 2007).

PART 1: SCOPE AND CONSEQUENCES

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In Summit County, home to Akron, fentanyl has remained a leading factor in overdose deaths for nearly a decade. Recent county health statistics indicate that fentanyl was detected in the majority of overdose fatalities, with local overdose rates consistently surpassing national averages. Nationally, deaths involving synthetic opioids, including fentanyl, surged by over 56% between 2019 and 2020 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021). Locally, Akron has witnessed what is frequently referred to as a "fentanyl crisis," with Summit County's overdose death rate rising to one of the highest in Ohio in recent years.

Despite some progress made through initiatives such as naloxone distribution and public health campaigns, the infiltration of fentanyl into other substances—including cocaine, methamphetamine, and counterfeit pills—poses severe risks for individuals who may be unaware of their opioid consumption (Reese & Vera, 2007). The ramifications of this ongoing crisis extend across multiple facets of the community, including:

Physical Health

There is an elevated risk of fatal overdose in Summit County, primarily due to the widespread availability of fentanyl and its analogs. Fentanyl's potency—estimated to be 50 to 100 times stronger than morphine—greatly increases the likelihood of overdose, particularly in individuals who may unknowingly ingest potent mixtures. For survivors of overdose, the long-term health complications can be severe and multifaceted. Many experience neurological impairments, which can manifest as cognitive deficits, memory issues, and difficulties with

motor coordination due to brain damage caused by extended oxygen deprivation (hypoxia) during the overdose event. Survivors may also suffer from multisystem organ failure as a result of prolonged hypoxia and the toxic effects of fentanyl on the body. For instance, organ systems such as the liver and kidneys may sustain irreversible damage.

Mental Health

Mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, trauma, and grief, have significantly risen in Summit County, especially among individuals misusing substances and those impacted by overdose incidents. The opioid crisis has created an environment of distress, where substance misuse often exacerbates underlying mental health challenges, leading to a vicious cycle (Reese & Vera, 2007). Many individuals report symptoms of depression, including persistent sadness and hopelessness, while anxiety surrounding addiction can drive further substance use as a maladaptive coping mechanism. The traumatic impact of overdose incidents often compounds existing issues, resulting in complicated grief for family members struggling with loss (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021). The psychological toll extends to families, causing discord and instability that leave children vulnerable to neglect and emotional issues. Therefore, community interventions need to integrate mental health services with addiction treatment, foster resilience, provide educational resources, and create support networks for individuals and families to facilitate long-term recovery (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], n.d.).

Social, Educational, and Family Disruption

Families in Akron face significant instability as a direct consequence of the opioid crisis, which manifests in the loss of loved ones, the placement of children into foster care, and the erosion of community cohesion (Reese & Vera, 2007). The tragic deaths of parents or siblings due to overdose create profound grief and disruption within households, forcing many children into foster care and further fracturing familial support systems. Students affected by these traumatic losses often experience increased absenteeism as they struggle to cope with their emotions and adjust to the abrupt changes in their home lives. Moreover, these children frequently face difficulties with focus and emotional resilience in educational settings, leading to challenges in academic performance and social interactions. The repercussions of such instability extend beyond individual families, undermining the overall fabric of the community as local support networks become strained and resources are stretched thin in an effort to address the ongoing crisis (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021). Comprehensive community interventions are essential to providing support for grieving families and ensuring that affected students receive the necessary resources to thrive both emotionally and academically (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], n.d.).

Economic Impact

The fentanyl crisis places immense strain on local resources, including emergency medical services, law enforcement, healthcare systems, and addiction treatment providers. This situation is further compounded by economic burdens, such as productivity losses and escalating long-term healthcare costs that significantly impact the community as a whole (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021). In response to these challenges, the community must develop comprehensive and culturally informed strategies that effectively address the

complexities of substance misuse and its widespread consequences (Reese & Vera, 2007; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], n.d.).

PART 2: SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL MODEL

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The fentanyl crisis in Akron, Ohio, represents one of the most pressing public health challenges confronting the community, marked by a disturbing increase in overdose deaths. The social-ecological model (SEM) offers a robust framework for understanding the complex interplay of risk and protective factors across multiple levels of influence—individual, relationship, community, and societal (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2024). By analyzing these layers, interventions can be more effectively designed to address the multifaceted nature of fentanyl misuse.

Individual level

Risk factors include early initiation into substance use, co-occurring mental health disorders, housing instability, and patterns of solitary substance use, all of which heighten vulnerability to overdose (County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, 2018; National Library of Medicine, 2024). The potency of fentanyl, particularly its illicit presence in cocaine, methamphetamine, and counterfeit pills, further exacerbates these risks for unsuspecting users. Conversely, protective factors such as personal resilience traits, including self-control, self-efficacy, and emotional regulation, can mitigate these risks. Social-emotional learning programs, refusal skills training, and health literacy initiatives have shown promise in reducing

substance misuse (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2019).

Relational level

Family and peer influences play a crucial role in either amplifying or alleviating risk. Families impacted by parental substance misuse, mental illness, or ineffective communication create environments that increase youth vulnerability to substance use. Similarly, peer groups that engage in substance misuse can normalize risky behaviors (SAMHSA, 2019). In contrast, strong parent-child attachments, supportive adult relationships, and positive peer networks serve as protective factors. Mentorship initiatives and family-centered interventions can foster resilience, promote healthy decision-making, and reduce the likelihood of substance misuse initiation (Walden Scholars of Change, 2015; CDC, 2024).

Community level

Structural and environmental conditions significantly influence access to resources and risk exposure. Communities in Akron facing concentrated poverty, unemployment, and inadequate social services often experience higher levels of substance availability and diminished prevention opportunities (Health Policy and Systems, 2020). The proliferation of illicit drug markets and limited prescription disposal programs further increase the risk of opioid exposure (Wyoming Prevention Depot, n.d.). Protective community factors include strong social cohesion, access to after-school programs, faith-based outreach, and coordinated coalitions focused on prevention and treatment. Evidence-based frameworks such as Communities That

Care exemplify effective, data-driven prevention strategies and could serve as a model for Akron to bolster community-level protections (Wikipedia, n.d.).

Societal level

Overarching social norms, policies, and systemic inequities contribute to the fentanyl crisis. Stigmatization of addiction, permissive cultural attitudes toward drug use, and inadequate regulation of opioid distribution further exacerbate risk (National Sexual Violence Resource Center [NSVRC], 2019). Social determinants of health, including economic instability and structural inequities, as articulated through Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, significantly influence substance misuse vulnerability (Guy-Evans, 2020; Walden University, 2024). Protective societal factors encompass robust prescription monitoring programs, equitable treatment access, and policy frameworks prioritizing prevention. The SAMHSA Strategic Prevention Framework exemplifies the importance of sustained funding, public awareness campaigns, and policy advocacy as essential tools for fostering long-term structural change (SAMHSA, 2019).

PART 3: THEORIES OF PREVENTION

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To ground a prevention program addressing Akron's fentanyl crisis in well-supported theory, two complementary approaches have been selected: the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and Social Cognitive Theory (SCT). These frameworks effectively account for the individual, relational, and community factors previously identified, providing a robust

foundation for influencing protective behaviors, such as carrying naloxone, seeking treatment, and engaging in overdose intervention. By fostering positive attitudes and strengthening social norms, these theories can significantly enhance the community's capacity to adopt harm-reduction practices.

Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

The Theory of Planned Behavior posits that individual attitudes, perceived norms, and behavioral intentions are critical in shaping intentions and protective actions. This framework aligns with Akron's goals of reshaping community norms related to harm reduction and reducing barriers to learning protective behaviors. By fostering favorable attitudes, normative support, and stronger behavioral intentions, the community can improve outcomes such as naloxone carriage, access to testing, and uptake of treatment (National Cancer Institute [NCI], 2005; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2019). Changing perceptions regarding the value and safety of overdose-prevention actions can drive collective awareness and foster community engagement. By framing overdose prevention as a shared challenge—a "we problem" rather than a "they problem"—individuals can unite in coordinated efforts. Leveraging peer and family influence to normalize harm-reduction practices, such as carrying naloxone and using test strips, can substantially impact the crisis that affects millions. Enhancing behavioral control by reducing barriers and empowering individuals through free training, naloxone access, and transportation support can facilitate informed, confident action. This approach drives changes in attitudes toward prevention and treatment, shifts perceived norms within peer networks, addresses barriers to behavioral control, and strengthens individuals' intentions to engage in protective actions.

Evidence-Based Program

Social Cognitive Theory emphasizes social learning, self-efficacy, and environmental influences, making it ideally suited for community-based prevention strategies like those addressing Akron's overdose problem. This theory supports peer-led education, the modeling of protective behaviors, and the strengthening of self-efficacy for overdose-prevention actions (SAMHSA, 2019). Observational learning enables peers and recovering individuals to model harm-reduction practices, fostering the confidence to carry naloxone, administer it effectively, and pursue treatment. By helping individuals recognize how interventions can simultaneously modify personal factors, behaviors, and their environment, this approach can build robust peer and family support networks while improving resource access. SCT constructs can effectively promote harm reduction and treatment engagement, allowing for program adaptation based on participant and community feedback. Research supports the efficacy of Social Cognitive Theory in health promotion, underpinning peer-led training and environmental supports that reinforce protective behaviors (SAMHSA, 2019). The objective of TPB is to shift subjective norms to support harm-reduction behaviors, enhancing perceived behavioral control by reducing barriers.

Community

At the community level, Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) emphasizes social learning and the importance of peer influence, making it a valuable approach for addressing Akron's overdose crisis. By implementing peer-led education programs, members of the community can model protective behaviors, such as carrying naloxone and seeking treatment, thereby fostering a culture of harm reduction. Observational learning encourages individuals to adopt these practices as they see others doing so successfully, enhancing their self-efficacy. This communal approach

not only builds strong peer and family support networks but also improves access to resources, creating an environment where harm reduction practices are normalized and reinforced. Adaptations based on participant feedback ensure that the programs remain relevant and effective, further encouraging community engagement in prevention efforts.

Society

On a societal level, SCT can drive systemic change by reshaping public perceptions around substance use and addiction. By leveraging peer mentors to share success stories and personal testimonials, the framework challenges stigma and fosters a more compassionate understanding of addiction as a public health issue rather than a moral failing. This shift in narrative encourages broader acceptance of harm-reduction strategies within society, leading to increased support for policies that prioritize prevention and treatment. As social norms evolve to embrace harm reduction, there is greater potential for implementing robust prescription monitoring programs and equitable access to treatment resources. Ultimately, SCT contributes to a societal environment that prioritizes health and well-being, empowering individuals to engage in protective actions and sustain meaningful behavior change while promoting a collective response to the overdose crisis.

PART 4: DIVERSITY AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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As Akron faces a troubling increase in fentanyl-related overdoses, addressing diversity and ethical considerations in prevention efforts is paramount. Focusing specifically on the

Black/African American residents in Summit County highlights significant disparities in substance use outcomes and healthcare access. Current data indicate that this subgroup encounters considerable barriers, including stigma, mistrust of healthcare systems, and historical mistreatment, which greatly hinder their engagement with prevention and treatment services (Reese & Vera, 2007; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2024). Additionally, social determinants such as poverty, housing instability, and transportation issues exacerbate vulnerability and complicate efforts to promote sustained engagement in prevention initiatives (Beacon Journal, 2023). Therefore, it is essential that ethical considerations—including stakeholder collaboration, informed consent, and confidentiality—are prioritized to ensure equitable access to care and to foster trust within the community (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2021; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], n.d.).

The unique challenges faced by Black residents not only illuminate the need for culturally tailored prevention strategies but also raise significant ethical concerns regarding fairness and access in treatment. The stigma surrounding substance use can discourage individuals from seeking help and participating in harm reduction programs (Walden Scholars of Change, 2015). Furthermore, the limited availability of culturally competent services can restrict effective engagement and response to overdose incidents. To counter these obstacles, it is crucial to implement outreach strategies that build trust within the community by collaborating with local institutions such as faith organizations and barbershops, which can serve as trusted sources of information and support (Beacon Journal, 2023). These outreach efforts should include educational campaigns designed to resonate with the community's values and experiences, ensuring that messaging is both respectful and relevant (SAMHSA, 2019).

Enhancing Cultural Relevance

Cultural relevance in prevention programming is vital for addressing the needs of Akron's diverse population effectively. Strategies for improvement could involve co-creating prevention initiatives with community leaders to ensure that outreach messaging and methods reflect local languages and values (Reese & Vera, 2007; SAMHSA, n.d.). Additionally, implementing culturally competent service delivery with responsive personnel and tailored resources will help to mitigate barriers to access. Engaging community members in the formulation of these initiatives fosters an environment of collaboration and shared ownership over prevention efforts. By prioritizing cultural sensitivity and relevance, prevention programs can better respond to the needs of affected populations, promote trust and engagement, and ultimately improve outcomes in reducing fentanyl-related harms.

PART 5: ADVOCACY

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Institutional Level

At the institutional level, stigmatizing attitudes and rigid clinical norms within healthcare and addiction treatment settings create significant barriers for individuals affected by fentanyl. Many institutions continue to rely on abstinence-only models and impose strict compliance requirements, which can deter those who might benefit from harm reduction strategies like medication-assisted treatment (MAT) and naloxone distribution (Ratts et al., 2015). To address these challenges, advocacy efforts should involve collaboration with hospitals and community

health centers to mandate continuing education on harm reduction and bias awareness. Incorporating the insights of Peer Support Specialists and leveraging local data can facilitate a cultural shift among clinicians, improving service engagement and outcomes within the community (Summit County Public Health, 2024).

Community Level

At the community level, fragmentation among service providers and the exclusion of marginalized voices hinder effective responses to the fentanyl crisis. Despite the presence of various local organizations, many remain under-resourced, and those affected often lack meaningful input in decision-making processes. The Summit County Opioid Healing Fund's allocation of over $1.2 million highlights the need for stronger community ownership and coordination, as overdose incidents remain alarmingly high (Akron Community Foundation, 2025). Advocacy efforts should focus on establishing a Community Fentanyl Response Coalition, bringing together residents, peer recovery organizations, and local nonprofits to collaboratively plan naloxone distribution and public education initiatives that are culturally responsive and community-led.

Public Policy Level

Systemic barriers at the public policy level include unstable funding for prevention and restrictive laws that impede harm reduction efforts, such as needle exchanges and safe consumption sites. While Ohio's decriminalization of fentanyl test strips in 2023 is a step forward, uncertainties remain regarding supervised consumption sites (Summit County Public Health, 2023). To address these issues, advocacy should mobilize local counselors, public health

advocates, and community members to testify before legislative bodies, emphasizing the need for sustainable funding for naloxone access, syringe exchange programs, and expanded MAT. This effort will help shift policy priorities toward prevention and harm reduction strategies.

Advocacy Actions

Successful advocacy must actively engage individuals with lived experience, ensuring their perspectives shape intervention strategies. The MSJCC emphasizes counselors' role in supporting clients' advocacy efforts and helping them navigate institutional systems (Ratts et al., 2015). By integrating institutional training, clinical practice, and policy advocacy, Akron can cultivate an environment that embraces harm reduction, enhances community ownership and trust, and implements supportive policy frameworks. A cohesive advocacy approach can lead to a reduction in fentanyl-related deaths and a transformative shift in how Akron treats substance use as a public health issue.

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