

Chicago Sun-Times

Groups call for safe-use site as opioid overdose deaths climb

Overdose prevention groups continue to offer innovative solutions — such as stocking old newspaper distribution boxes with anti-overdose medicine — but say such efforts are not enough as deaths continue to rise.

By [Michael Loria](#)

Jul 28, 2023, 7:15pm CDT



Dr. Thomas Huggett, who works at the Lawndale Christian Health Center, opens a box for state Rep. La Shawn K. Ford as he places free bags of Narcan (naloxone) inside it at the intersection of West Jackson Boulevard and South Pulaski Road in the East Garfield Park neighborhood after a press conference several blocks away, where members of the West Side Heroin/Opioid Task Force promoted harm reduction services and Ford advocated for the passing of House Bill 2, which Ford said will allow the Illinois Department of Human Services and the City of Chicago to start overdose prevention sites on the West and South Sides, Friday, July 28, 2023.

Pat Nabong/Sun-Times

They once were used to distribute news. Now, they're saving lives.

On Chicago's West Side, 20 of those plastic boxes — the kind where people might have picked up a free copy of a local weekly are now stocked with anti-overdose medicine.

It's the latest effort to tackle overdose deaths in the area

The Cook County Medical Examiner's Office earlier this week released the latest statistics that show the number of [people dying from opioid overdoses in Cook County continues to rise](#).

Each of the purple boxes on the West Side was stocked with 200 doses of naloxone (also known by the brand name Narcan), along with instructions on how to use the overdose antidote drug.

But that effort will only help so much, prevention groups say, until the state allows safe-use sites to be created. At a safe-use site, users could get high under the watch of care providers.

"It would be the most effective means to reduce death from overdose," said Dave Jimenez, director of the University of Illinois Chicago's Community Outreach Intervention Projects, one of the city's leading overdose prevention providers.

Jimenez was one of several prevention group leaders who spoke at a news conference Friday in the 400 block of South Pulaski Road in West Garfield Park, a well-known epicenter of Cook County's opioid crisis.

The groups say the newspaper box approach can reach users at hours when street outreach teams aren't on duty.



Free Narcan (naloxone) is inside a box at the intersection of West Jackson Boulevard and South Pulaski Road in the East Garfield Park neighborhood, Friday, July 28, 2023.
Pat Nabong/Sun-Times

But, above all, the groups gathered to show support for [House Bill 2](#), which would allow the safe-use overdose prevention site.

“We’re here united for a cause,” said state Rep. La Shawn Ford, the lead sponsor. “These are our friends, parents and children who are being affected and they deserve a chance to achieve lasting recovery.”

Safe-use sites allow drug use and typically offer wrap-around services such housing assistance or counseling to help users recover. There are dozens of such sites around the world, though just a few in the United States.

Until then, other approaches in place include substance abuse clinics based in vans and even an unofficial safe-use site, where users who are already high can come and be looked after.

The news conference was held adjacent to that site — a tent staffed by West Side Heroin Opioid Task Force outreach workers — which operates alongside

a COIP mobile care unit that was among the first in Illinois to deliver Suboxone, a methadone-like treatment.



University of Illinois Chicago's Community Outreach Intervention Projects' mobile clinic, parked at a lot near Van Buren Street and Pulaski Road in the East Garfield Park neighborhood, where members of the West Side Heroin/Opioid Task Force held a news conference Friday.
Pat Nabong/Sun-Times

Lee Rusch, executive director of the West Side group, said prevention providers began coming up with different approaches after opioid overdose deaths spiked 43% to 1,846 people in 2020. The tally reached 2,000 last year.

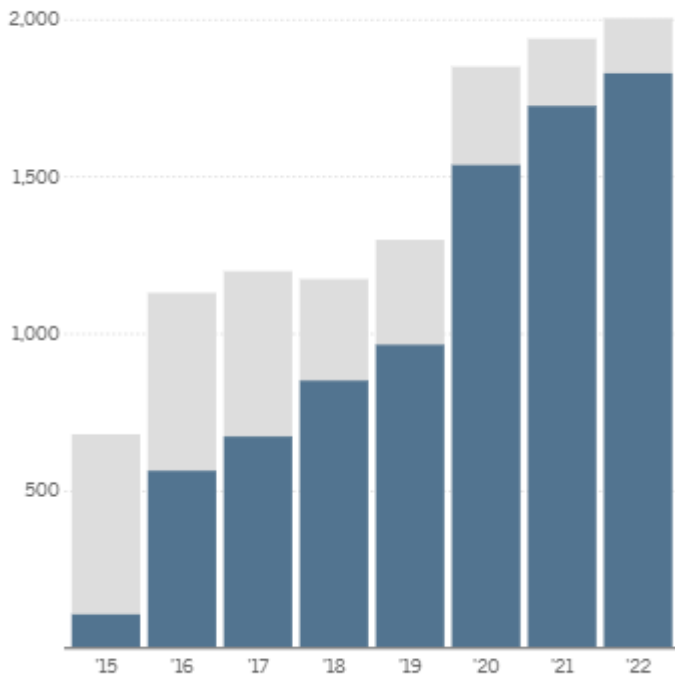
Rusch's group has surveyed West Side residents about opening a safe-use site and said while many voiced concerns about whether such sites encourage drug use, the "vast majority agree something needs to be done."

Though opioid overdoses continue to climb, the rate of increase has slowed drastically. After that 43% spike in 2020, deaths increased by 5% in 2021 and

3% last year. Rusch attributed that in part to the work of overdose prevention providers, but said it's not enough.

"It isn't a chest beating success," he said. "We're putting millions into this thing and people are still dying."

As opioid deaths rise, fentanyl continues to make up the majority of cases



Source: Cook County Medical Examiner
Jesse Howe/Sun-Times

Cook County appears to be on pace to see another increase this year.

So far this year, there have been 811 confirmed opioid-related overdose deaths in the county, said Brittany Hill, a spokeswoman for the medical examiner's office, with 696 cases still pending and the medical examiner's office expects 70% of those to be opioid-related.

That would put Cook County at 1,298 opioid-related deaths for the year so far. At this time last year, the tally stood at 1,060.

Opioid-related deaths are overwhelmingly linked to fentanyl, the synthetic drug which is often mixed with heroin — but is 50 times more potent. A growing number are related to xylazine, an animal tranquilizer.

Tanya Sorrell, a professor of psychology at Rush University Medical Center, asked those gathered for the news conference if they had been affected by overdoses among their friends and family. Nearly everyone raised a hand.



Sheila Haennicke, holds a picture of her son David Haennicke at a news conference on Friday. David, she said, died from a fentanyl overdose in November 2021. Members of the West Side Heroin/Opioid Task Force held the news conference to promote their efforts to reduce overdose deaths in the area.
Pat Nabong/Sun-Times

Sheila Haennicke of Oak Park held a picture of her son, who died of an overdose in 2021. A passerby, who said he was from the neighborhood, said he had to save someone right on that block recently, using one of the overdose antidotes.

“Black, white, rich, poor, it affects all of us,” Sorrell said. “No more moving backwards.”

Michael Loria is a staff reporter at the Chicago Sun-Times via [Report for America](#), a not-for-profit journalism program that aims to bolster the paper’s coverage of communities on the South Side and West Side.