



Episode 10: Opioid Overdoses Within School Communities

#REMSontheAir Podcast Intro (Recorded): [00:00:00] Welcome to the #REMSontheAir Podcast, hosted by your partners at the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Supportive Schools and its Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center. If you're an old friend, you know us as the REMS TA Center, your national school safety center.

Join us as we chat about key topics in school and campus safety, security, and emergency management with experts and partners from the field.

Janelle Hughes: Hello and welcome back. This is Janelle Hughes, Project Director of the REMS TA Center. I'm joined by our Director of Information and Product Management, Alison Curtis, and today we're going to talk about opioid crisis. We'll cover key terminology and discuss how to incorporate drug-related emergencies [00:01:00] into emergency operations plans for schools.

Alison Curtis: Thanks, Janelle. This is such a critical topic for schools to be aware of and get support with addressing and managing. Opioid use and abuse was declared a national public health emergency in 2017 and is a concern to schools because it's so broadly and deeply affects individuals and communities. So, in today's episode, we want to address how schools can include opioid overdose as a human-caused threat within a school emergency operations plan.

Janelle Hughes: As you mentioned earlier, Alison, the opioid crisis was declared a national public health emergency in 2017 and is affecting urban, suburban, and rural America. Several factors contributed to this declaration. First, the number of Americans dying from drug overdoses has been increasing at unprecedented rates.

In fact, data showed that, in 2016, more Americans [00:02:00] died of opioid overdoses than in car accidents. Second, these numbers are likely to increase because of the negative effects that COVID-19 and the pandemic has had on the physical and mental health of many Americans.

Alison Curtis: Janelle, another factor that contributed to the opioid crisis are the numbers of adolescents and young adults who have been affected by them.

In 2016, an estimated 239,000 adolescents aged 12 to 17 and 631,000 young adults aged 18 to 25 were misusers of pain relievers. The numbers are just as frightening for those with actual pain reliever use disorders; 152,000 adolescents aged 12 to 17 and 291,000 young adults aged 18 to 25 reported pain reliever use disorders, and 1.3 million adults aged 26 or older [00:03:00] had a pain reliever use disorder. So, this has become an issue that not only affects adolescents and adults, but entire communities, including the school community, which impacts the overall safety of the environment and, ultimately, a student's sense of safety.

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Janelle Hughes: Wow. Considering the increase during the pandemic and these numbers, it really puts things into perspective, Alison, and explains why so many different Federal agencies, such as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the U.S. Department of Education, and the Drug Enforcement Agency—and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—have come together to combat this issue by educating parents, students, and community partners and by providing resources on prevention and overcoming opioid addiction.

Alison Curtis: Before we go any further, let's make sure we all have a common understanding of some key terms and definitions. Opioids are a class of drugs that are natural or synthetic [00:04:00] chemicals that reduce feelings of pain, most of which are legally available by prescription. Common types of opioids are oxycodone, hydrocodone, morphine, and codeine. Fentanyl and methadone are synthetic opioids, which means that they're created by artificial chemicals, and heroin is a semisynthetic opioid because it is made from morphine that has been chemically processed.

Janelle Hughes: Thank you for sharing those examples and definitions, Alison.

Now let's turn our attention to the terminology about misuse and abuse of opioids.

According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, drug misuse occurs when an individual uses drugs not according to directions from their healthcare providers. For example, taking two pills a day when they've been told to take only one. Drug abuse occurs when an individual takes drugs to get a euphoric response.

An opioid use disorder or addiction is rare with [00:05:00] short-term medical use, but longer-term use can lead to opioid dependence, tolerance, and possibly addiction. In fact, one large dose of an opioid can slow or stop the breathing, and, especially when used with alcohol or sedatives, can lead to a fatal overdose.

This brings us to another key term that is also important to know. Naloxone is an opioid antagonist or a medication that can quickly reverse an opioid overdose by restoring breathing that has slowed down or stopped.

Alison Curtis: Janelle, that is so helpful to know the different types of opioids there are and the negative effects that they can have.

This is not just an isolated issue related to opioid usage, but substance abuse in general. In fact, in a webinar that we hosted in August of 2020, we spoke to Dr. Sycarah Fisher, who is an assistant professor of educational psychology from the University of Georgia, who shared [00:06:00] how substance use has comorbidities and can appear with other disorders.

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This information is so important for school officials to know about and understand why they can begin planning for an opioid overdose in their emergency operations plans. Let's listen to a clip right now from that webinar.

Dr. Sycarah Fisher (Recorded): Substance use doesn't just occur in a vacuum. It is often a symptom of some other underlying mental health concerns.

There are a plethora of research connecting substance misuse with externalizing behaviors, such as conduct disorder and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. This has been hypothesized to be related to an underlying genetic externalizing factor that contributes not only to these externalizing behaviors but also to alcohol and drug dependence. So, knowing this, think about the kids in your school who will be most at risk for developing a substance use disorder.

Maybe the ones with an [00:07:00] IEP [Individualized Education Program] for an emotional behavioral disorder, those kids who just can't stay in their seat and blurt out their answers. Those are the kids that may already have risk factors priming them for current or later drug abuse.

Janelle Hughes: Knowing the potential issues that could arise, not just from opioid misuse and abuse, but the comorbidities with other disorders, such as ADHD and anxiety and depression, makes it a threat to the school community and the larger community.

Schools, school districts, and institutions of higher education need to know this information because it could literally save lives. Due to the potential for loss of life, this is another reason why it is so important for schools to consider protocols to address an opioid overdose in their preparedness efforts and, as Alison mentioned, within EOPs [emergency operations plans].

Alison Curtis: Absolutely. And as with all emergency planning and preparedness efforts, we recommend looking at the threat of opioid overdose from the [00:08:00] angle of before, during, and after an incident, and also within the framework of prevention, protection, mitigation, response, and recovery, as featured in the *Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans*, also known as the *School Guide*, and the *Role of Districts in Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans*, or the *District Guide*.

We have many resources on our Website on these *Guides*, and you may be familiar with the six-step planning process that's described within them. We have also created an opioid fact sheet with more detailed information as to how schools can use the six-step planning process to develop an opioid overdose annex with their collaborative planning team and seek guidance from a variety of individuals who have expertise in treating opioid overdoses directly or those with experience in treating drug or alcohol addiction in general.

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A few key people may include campus health service [00:09:00] providers, school nurses, first responders, and public health professionals.

Janelle Hughes: And if you are one of those professionals, we hope that you have an opportunity to visit our Website to access those resources that Alison just shared.

I am so glad that you mentioned the opioids fact sheet because we do go into more detail about integrating efforts to prevent an opioid overdose using the five preparedness missions of prevention, protection, mitigation, response, and recovery.

We provide practical solutions such as integrating efforts to prevent an opioid overdose with other alcohol and other drug prevention programming; also providing information and trainings to educators on identifying the risk signs of opioid use, which would fall under protection. It also includes details on implementing evidence-based screening tools, which relates to mitigation and covers how and when an opioid antagonist would be administered in [00:10:00] response to an overdose. And, finally, this fact sheet provides tailored support and services or details on how to provide those tailored support and services for recovery from an addiction or an overdose. So, again, we encourage you to visit our Website and to download that fact sheet and other resources that we provide on this important topic.

Alison Curtis: Those are such great resources, Janelle, and we definitely want to connect our listeners to more resources to support their work. First, we already mentioned that opioids fact sheet that the REMS TA Center researched and published on *Preparing for Opioid-Related Emergencies for K-12 Schools and Institutions of Higher Education*.

We also encourage you to download this resource to learn more about developing an opioid overdose annex. And this fact sheet also references more resources that you can explore. As we mentioned, the REMS TA Center hosted a [00:11:00] webinar on opioid stroke-related emergencies and substance abuse prevention before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic, which features Dr. Fisher as a presenter. Definitely watch this archived 90-minute webinar that explores the concepts that we talked about today more in depth and features some Federal resources that can support your work on youth drug use and substance abuse prevention. Now that you've learned a bit more about this topic, we do encourage you to check to see if your school has an opioid overdose annex in its emergency operations plan.

If not, your school safety planning team may want to consider developing one. Lastly, think about whom you can share the resources and information we discussed today with in this podcast, such as those with roles and responsibilities in opioids, drug-related emergencies, and substance abuse prevention.

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Janelle Hughes: Thanks so much for that final point, Alison. [00:12:00] And thank you to all of you for tuning in today. Please remember to follow the REMS TA Center on social media and to bookmark the *#REMSontheAir* hashtag. You can also tweet us using the *#REMSontheAir* hashtag if you are dealing with similar issues.

And if you have any questions about the things we discussed today, or want to learn more, send us your questions via email or call us at 1-855-781-7367 to pose questions that can be possibly featured on future podcasts. Don't forget that you can also email us at any time via info@remstacenter.org, or you can visit our Website to join our mailing list, where we'll get you up-to-date information on the webinars, Web chats, and other virtual opportunities that we offer and share.

Thank you so much again for tuning into the *#REMSontheAir* Podcast.