“From the beginning, we couldn’t have done any of it on our own. It just would have been impossible.”

– Herb Linn, WVU ICRC

The naloxone distribution program in West Virginia provides widespread availability of a life-saving drug to reverse opioid overdoses in one of the highest-risk states in the nation. In late 2011, researchers at the West Virginia University Injury Control Research Center (WVU ICRC) recognized the state’s troubling opioid crisis and began reviewing literature to identify evidence-based strategies to prevent fatal overdoses in the state.

WVU ICRC researchers, with the aid of community partners—such as physicians, behavioral health specialists, and state advisory groups and coalitions—set out to study the feasibility of take-home naloxone programs in the state, in the form of interviews with users throughout the community. Results from the study indicated that take-home naloxone programs could help address the overdose epidemic in West Virginia by providing residents with life-saving medication that they could administer if they witnessed an overdose. WVU ICRC researchers presented their findings to stakeholders across the state, which helped create buy-in and critical support for the implementation of the programs. WVU ICRC researchers and their partners provided training and education for agencies and practitioners wishing to distribute take-home naloxone, and continue to provide technical assistance to communities. WVU ICRC’s expertise and community-based work around opioid overdose prevention also led to an evaluation partnership with the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources (WVDHHR) for CDC-funded prescription drug overdose prevention grants (the Prescription Drug Overdose: Boost for State Prevention grant and Prevention for States [PfS] grant).
FOSTERING STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

• Building trust with a local community entails not only giving them useful information, but helping them design a strategy to move forward. The WVU ICRC reported that local leaders shared the strategy with neighboring communities, resulting in a “snowball effect” that allowed the distribution program to grow in scope.

• When engaging community partners, it is important to ensure that they understand the larger context of the effort. This will encourage buy-in and dispel any concerns of misunderstanding their role as trivial. Additionally, ensuring that all partners are informed of the big picture will help them as they plan for sustainability. For example, keeping local partners apprised of the status of funding mechanisms in West Virginia helped them determine the level of financial support they need to pursue to achieve their goals.

• Frequent communication is essential to any successful partnership, and scheduling a fixed, regular meeting will ensure that partners connect even among competing priorities. To accomplish this, WVU ICRC and WVDHHR set a standing meeting to discuss the status of the PfS grant.

• When WVU ICRC researchers began attending community meetings, they assumed the role of a listener, with no agenda or concrete goal in mind. This allowed them to develop a comprehensive picture of each community’s strengths, challenges, and characteristics before contributing to devising a solution. Throughout the process of researching, designing, and implementing the take-home naloxone program, the ICRC’s approach to relationship-building with state and local partners encouraged an environment of trust and openness.

REMAINING FLEXIBLE

• Epidemics such as the opioid overdose crisis in West Virginia evolve over time, necessitating not only attention to rapidly changing trends, but the ability to pivot to new approaches when required. Process and outcome evaluation can assist with determining where and how to change project methods. Additionally, awareness of culture shifts and legislative priorities can benefit any research-practice partnership, as additional resources, as well as educational and strategic opportunities may arise. This awareness allowed them to be poised to provide timely information and thought leadership as soon as opportunities arose in the state legislature.

WORKING ACROSS AGENCIES

• Understanding the intricacies of each organization’s respective culture and management structure is important to maintaining a realistic view of how the project will operate. The grant management process at WVDHHR can be time consuming, but the WVU ICRC was able to sustain its role in the project through other funding sources in the interim. Different timelines, funding, and processes are all operational realities that every partner should understand when embarking on a new joint effort.