

New Mexico Prescription Improvement Coalition – Guidelines and Treatment Algorithms

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New Mexico
Prescription Improvement Coalition

Take Your PIC

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Spotlight: New Local Project

North Carolina-Based Project Lazarus Presented as Model for Taos Prescription Drug Abuse Effort

An effort to address prescription drug abuse in the Taos area was launched through a learning session on May 25. New Mexico ideally suited for this investigational project because it has some of the highest morbidity and mortality statistics in the country regarding substance addiction and abuse, as well as the nation's highest overall annualized drug-induced death rate at 22.8 deaths per 100,000. Taos was selected as the county of focus because it has the second-highest mortality and morbidity rates in the state and its medical community is focused and engaged in this topic.

The keynote speaker for the Taos event was Fred Brason from Project Lazarus, an effort based in Wilkes County, North Carolina, which initiated the first community oxycodone drug abuse study at the county level. Mr. Brason spoke again on May 26 on Project Lazarus to a group of NMPIC members and other interested professionals in Albuquerque. The following provides a brief overview of Project Lazarus, which will serve as a model for the Taos project.

Project Lazarus is a non-profit community-based program to reduce overdose deaths involving prescription opioids. Project Lazarus is based in Wilkes County, but support efforts throughout western North Carolina and the rest of the country. They encourage building community coalitions, providing education to patients and community members, providing rescue medication (*naloxone) in case an overdose occurs, and conducting surveillance and evaluations.

Project Lazarus is one of the more innovative public health interventions against fatalities from prescribed opioids in the United States. It is currently being piloted in Wilkes County and at Fort Bragg to help teach opioid overdose recognition, prevention and response in civilian and military populations.

According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC), Wilkes County has

one of the highest drug overdose death rates in the country, and most of western North Carolina has higher than average overdose death rates. Nearly all of these deaths involve prescription opioid pain relievers. Project Lazarus strives to correct the balance between the use of the medications and the unintended consequences of their misuse and abuse.

Project Lazarus includes the traditional components of epidemiologic surveillance; the implementation of a prevention program that trains both medical care providers and patients to more safely prescribe and use opioids that treat chronic pain, and the rigorous evaluation of program process and outcomes. Its novel components are the education and resultant support of the communities in which Project Lazarus is placed and the inclusion of a rescue program for community members who experience potentially fatal opioid overdoses. The rescue program designed by Project Lazarus trains medical care providers to screen their pain patients for risk factors associated with opioid-induced respiratory depression and encourages them to routinely prescribe naloxone to those who are considered to be at risk. Naloxone is the standard of care for reversing opioid overdoses in the U.S. Once patients are enrolled by their medical care provider, Project Lazarus provides them a free overdose rescue kit.

Project Lazarus works in conjunction with other programs in Wilkes County to reduce overdose deaths. Some accomplishments include:

- Educational programs that operate in the schools
- Expanding local options for drug abuse treatment
- Working with Wilkes Regional Medical Center to limit the amount of opioids dispensed in the emergency department
- Encouraging the use of the controlled substances reporting system to discourage doctor shopping
- Helping hire law enforcement officials with special training in prescription drug diversion
- Helping conduct drug disposal/take-back days
- Assisting in setting up a permanent disposal site for unused medications
- Supporting the Chronic Pain Initiative to inform doctors and nurses about proper pain management and create a toolkit
- Participating in national discussions about the safety of opioid medications at the Food and Drug Administration (FDA)
- Working with churches and the local faith community to promote overdose awareness and education
- Conducting surveillance for local “outbreaks” of drug problems

Project Lazarus operates through support from a variety of sources, including the Northwest Community Care Network (NCCN) [the regional Medicaid authority], the [Drug Policy Alliance](#), the Wilkes County Health Department, doctor’s offices and the pharmaceutical industry.

They do not accept funding from pharmaceutical companies that sell naloxone, but they have obtained funding from companies that sell prescription opioid pain relievers. In these instances, Project Lazarus has complete control over the content, design and evaluation of the work. Donations from pharmaceutical companies are part of their efforts to be responsible corporate citizens and reduce the inadvertent toll that their drugs have in the community, and Project Lazarus does not promote the use of their drugs.

Despite its historically high overdose death rates, Wilkes County is leading the way as the national model for how to reduce overdose deaths using community resources.

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