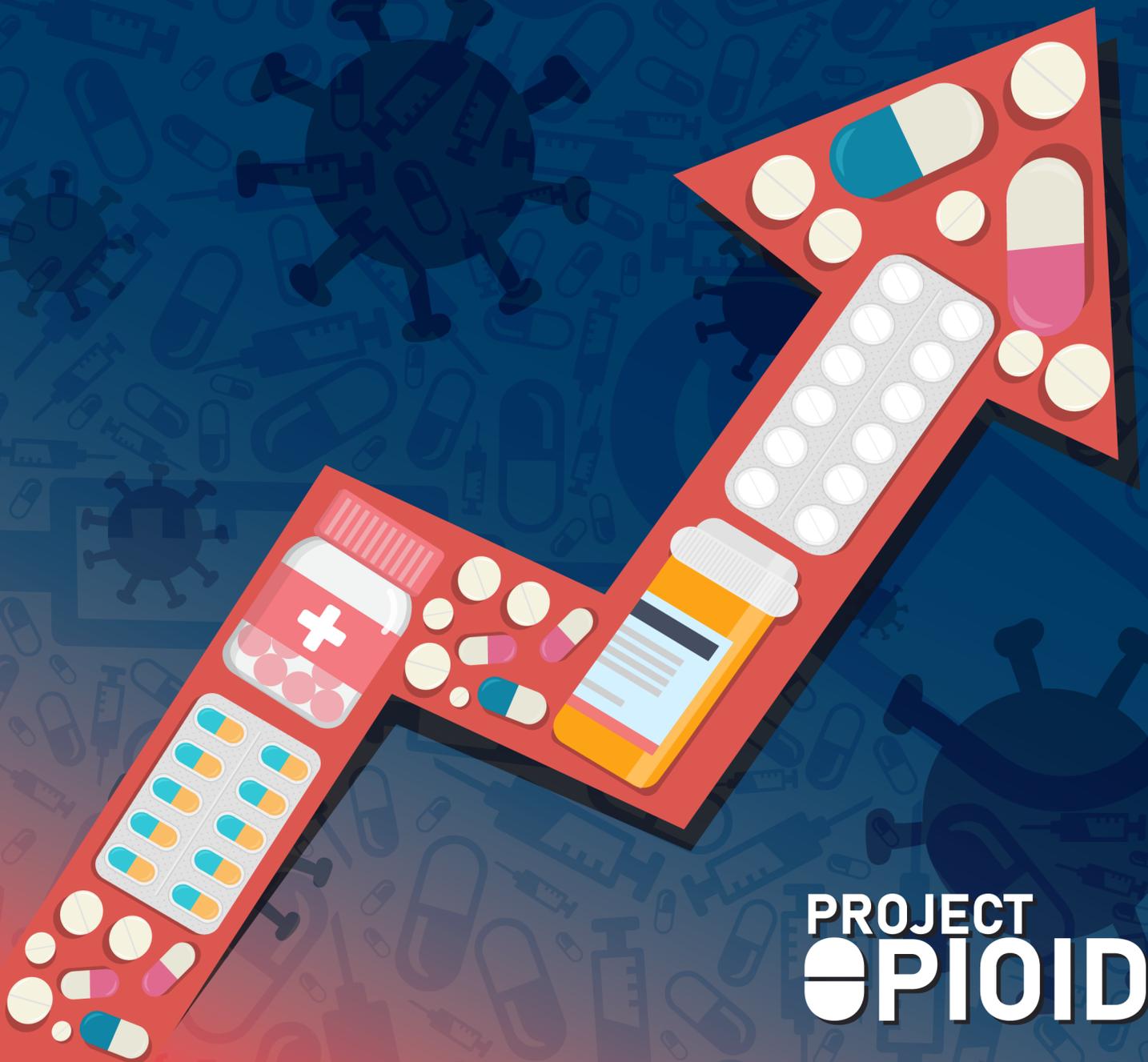


# The COVID-19 Overdose Crisis:

## Recommendations



PROJECT  
**OPiOID**

## *1. Don't distance yourself from crucial mental health resources.*

The COVID-19 pandemic has undeniably changed the way we navigate through our daily lives. The social and economic consequences of shutdown such job loss, financial stress, and threat of eviction, have inflicted a huge emotional toll upon the mental health of individuals and families across Florida. Societal closures during COVID-19 have led to reports of increased substance abuse, overdoses, decreased access to addiction treatment services, and increased calls to suicide prevention centers. The mental health of some of the most vulnerable people we know and love, including the elderly, minorities, youth, veterans, and people with disabilities, have been disproportionately impacted by the shutdown.

The disruption to services experienced during shutdown has caused an unforeseen amount of lives to suffer at the hands of opioid overdose. Although your life, or that of someone you love, may still be impacted by the social and economic conditions of the pandemic, do not distance yourself or your family from the critical help and behavioral health resources they may need. If someone you know and care for is exhibiting symptoms of substance abuse that may have been initiated or exacerbated by COVID-19, please encourage them to seek help from a licensed behavioral health practitioner in your area.

Many of those within our community may feel like behavioral health treatment and care are unavailable to them or their families due to social distancing and quarantine amid the pandemic. However, there are many virtual alternatives to care such as telehealth and telemedicine to help make mental health treatment accessible from the comfort of your home. Others may be reluctant to seek treatment due to the stigma surrounding mental health in our community. It is essential for us to recognize the importance of mental health during this time of crisis, and that there are resources available for those who may be struggling with mental health or substance abuse issues in our community amid the raging overdose crisis.

## ***2. Get tested not just for COVID-19, but also to assess your mental health symptoms.***

The coronavirus pandemic has created an unprecedented overdose crisis that not only impacts our physical health, but also our mental health. Many individuals across Florida are being tested for COVID-19 through diagnostic tests administered by their healthcare providers or active testing sites to prevent the spread of the deadly virus. Although it is imperative for each of us to understand our COVID-19 status, we must also take measures to assess our mental health during this emotionally testing time. There are simple online community tests to help you or a loved one assess your mental health status amid the pandemic.

Social distancing and quarantine may alter the ways in which we are able to receive behavioral health care; however, there are virtual alternatives we can employ to help connect ourselves and our loved ones to the services and care they need to cope with mental health and substance abuse issues during the pandemic. Those in need of services can see a mental health practitioner through virtual alternatives such as telehealth or telemedicine. Telehealth, or distance counseling, leverages technology to connect clients with behavioral health counseling, treatment, and care in real time through video conferencing, online chat, email messaging, or by phone. Telemedicine can be used as a means of delivering lifesaving opioid abuse treatments to patients in critical need amid COVID-19. By taking advantage of the virtual resources at our disposal, individuals and families across Florida can remain connected to the essential behavioral health treatment and medical care to help manage mental health and substance abuse symptoms and prevent overdose across our region.

## ***3. Gain access to overdose “vaccines.”***

Citizens across the nation and in our state of Florida are waiting in anticipation of a life-saving COVID-19 vaccine with the potential to prevent individuals and families in their communities from developing serious complications from the deadly virus. Although there is no vaccine approved to-date, there are FDA-approved MAT’s (medication-assisted treatments) that can help reverse the effects of an opioid overdose and prevent relapse amid the COVID-19-fueled overdose crisis.

Naloxone, commonly referred to as NARCAN, has the power to rapidly reverse symptoms of an overdose while it occurs to prevent fatal overdose and death. Medication-assisted treatments utilize life-saving medications such as buprenorphine, methadone, and naloxone, in combination with behavioral health services, to treat opioid use disorder and facilitate recovery for those struggling with substance misuse and addiction. By gaining access to these critical overdose “vaccines,” you can help prevent yourself or someone you love from overdosing and losing their lives at the hands of an opioid during COVID-19.

## 4. *Create a quality quarantine.*

From social distancing to quarantine, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a lasting effect on the daily lives of individuals and families across Florida. The societal and economic conditions of the pandemic have given rise to a historic mental health and substance abuse crisis that has impacted thousands of vulnerable households around the state. During events like the COVID-19 pandemic, it's normal to feel anxious, stressed, and even depressed. However, for those living with a serious mental health or substance abuse condition, normal feelings of anxiety, stress and depression may make their symptoms amplified and more difficult to manage. As we continue to spend less time socializing with others in-person and greater amounts of time isolated indoors, it is important that those in our community reserve time to care for their mental health during lockdown.

During this uncertain and contentious time, it is essential to focus on what you can control. Although it is natural to want to remain informed, it is important to limit your exposure to news about the ongoing pandemic. Dedicate time to disconnect from social media and step away from your television screen in order to prioritize your mental health. Engage in activities you enjoy such as unwinding to your favorite movie, taking a stroll outdoors, or spending quality time with loved ones while adhering to social distancing guidelines to help divert your focus away from negativity and towards the things you care about most. While in lockdown, remember to stay connected to those you loved through virtual alternatives such as Zoom meetings, regular phone calls, or social media.

If someone you know and care about is currently living with mental illness, it is important to be aware of how heightened stress and anxiety can impact their ability to cope during these uncertain times. If you or a loved one are struggling to cope with mental health or substance abuse symptoms that are initiated or worsened by the pandemic, seek professional treatment from a behavioral healthcare provider through telehealth or telemedicine services. A behavioral health specialist will be able to connect you to medical and behavioral treatment and care you need to manage your substance abuse or mental health symptoms during quarantine.

# FOR COMMUNITY LEADERS

## *1. Create a 100-day action plan in response to the overdose crisis.*

At Project Opioid, we believe that leaders can create a major impact on the overdose crisis by building a collaborative of high-impact leaders dedicated to solving this epidemic in their communities. In order to do so, community leaders must mobilize its regional frontline workers, including medical professionals within hospitals and behavioral health care centers, in collaboration with law enforcement, and other crucial community leaders to create a new pathway that will “flatten the curve” on this epidemic within the pandemic. These high-impact coalitions can confront the rising overdose crisis by leveraging cutting-edge data to shed light upon who is at greatest risk of overdose in your region, which resources are available to those suffering with mental health and substance abuse issues, and which obstacles they may encounter when seeking access to treatment and care.

Once leaders understand the state of the overdose crisis in their communities, they must then create a real-time dashboard of all the behavioral health resources available to someone struggling with substance abuse. Leaders must ensure these resources remain available to those in need in their community by monitoring resources archived within the system daily. Our community’s ability to impact those in greatest need ultimately depends on the policies and resources derived from state and even federal sources. Thus, coalitions of leaders must also mobilize federal and state financial resources in order to expand access to resources of those in need.



## *1. Expand access to mental and behavioral health services*

Florida has no state parity law that aligns our state with the federal “Paul Wellstone and Pete Domenici Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity” Act (MHPAEA), which prohibits health plans from applying financial requirements or treatment limitations to mental health and substance use disorder benefits that are more restrictive than those applied to any other medical or surgical benefit. The pandemic has provided an opportunity for Florida to pass a forward-thinking state parity law in 2021 that includes successful strategies deployed during the pandemic.

Pass a state parity law that mirrors the MHPAEA and CMS flexibilities issued for Medicare during the pandemic. The law should require private insurers to cover telehealth services and reimburse providers at the same rate as in-person visits. It should ensure that medications for opioid use disorder can be prescribed via telehealth without issue.

## 2. *Expand access to MAT*

Prior authorizations result in delayed access to care for 90% of patients who require them. For OUD patients, delayed or disrupted access to their medications is an immediate risk factor for a potentially fatal overdose. The longer a patient is on MAT, the more likely they will avoid relapse.

Florida Medicaid removed the prior authorization requirement for the first 7 days of treatment for the following medications: Buprenorphine single agent tablets, Buprenorphine/Naloxone combination tablets, Suboxone film, and Zubsolv tablets. However, a manual prior authorization is still required to continue treatment after the first 7 days, and a prior authorization must be submitted every 3 months to continue coverage.

***Our recommendation:*** Remove prior authorization requirements for medications for opioid use disorder.



### **3. *Make naloxone more readily accessible and available to everyone***

Distributing naloxone to laypeople, and particularly those likely to experience or witness an overdose, is the most cost-effective way to prevent overdose deaths. It is estimated that one heroin overdose death is prevented for every 164 naloxone kits distributed. When people can easily access naloxone and opioid overdose education in their city or town, overdose deaths decrease in those communities.

When researchers compared naloxone distribution strategies among three groups—laypeople, first responders, and EMS personnel—the top four most cost-effective strategies involved a high rate of naloxone distribution among laypeople, and strategies that did not have this always ranked last. This suggests that naloxone distribution to laypeople should always be prioritized.

***Our recommendation:*** Modify or issue a new standing order to make naloxone over-the-counter for everyone.