

PROJECT ECHO: OD-FIT

Overdose Fatality Investigation Techniques

Overdose Fatality Reviews

Overdose fatality reviews (OFRs) are based on the understanding that overdose deaths can be prevented through community mobilization and coordinated evidence-based prevention strategies. An OFR is a community-based prevention strategy where public health and safety partners convene to identify system gaps and highlight missed opportunities for specific strategies to prevent overdose deaths. A death review (also called a “case review”), examines the life of a person who died of an overdose to gain a deeper understanding of missed opportunities that may have prevented an overdose death. The case review analyzes a person’s drug use and treatment history, major health effects, social-emotional trauma including adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), encounters with the criminal legal system, and environmental factors. In aggregate, case reviews tell a story of the health of a community and the patterns of need and opportunity across systems to prevent overdose deaths.

Relevant Terminology

- **Overdose Fatality Review (OFR):** Overdose fatality reviews are a series of confidential death reviews conducted by a multidisciplinary team to identify gaps in care and offer evidence-based strategies to prevent overdose deaths in a community.
- **Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs):** Adverse childhood experiences are potentially traumatic events that can disrupt a child’s sense of safety, stability, and bonding, leading to long-term developmental issues and negative health outcomes (e.g., chronic health conditions, mental illness, and substance use problems).
- **High-Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA):** High-intensity drug trafficking area program helps federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies in areas considered to be critical drug trafficking regions of the United States.

Key Takeaways

- An OFR is a series of confidential death reviews conducted by a multidisciplinary team to identify gaps in care and offer evidence-based strategies to prevent overdose deaths in a community. The OFR may include local and state public health, behavioral health, public safety, clinical, and community partners (e.g., substance use prevention professionals, social workers, elected officials, county sheriffs, HIDTA public health analysts, tribal elders).
- OFRs are usually organized into a lead agency, governing committee, OFR team, and subcommittees to provide comprehensive and in-depth feedback, support, and resources to each case review. Oftentimes, it is helpful to have a coroner/medical examiner’s office serve as the lead agency as most of the data necessary to start the fatality review process comes from their office.
- The [OFR Data System](#) is a centralized database where OFR teams can securely store and track standardized data elements obtained during a case review. This system collects data on OFR

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meeting administration, decedent and next of kin information, community context, and recommendations.

- OFR teams will often analyze overdose trends in their community and bring in champions from higher-risk groups to support education initiatives and case selection. For example, if there is a higher rate of overdose among laborers, the OFR may reach out to trade unions or professional groups to provide education.

To learn more about overdose fatality reviews, please check out the [session recording](#), slides, and resource document, or email odfitecho@astho.org for more information.

About the Presenter: Mallory O’Brien, MS, PhD, is trained as an epidemiologist and has worked in the field of violence and overdose prevention for the past 25 years. She has a long history of working at the intersection of public safety and health. She serves on two interagency professional agreements with the Office of Justice Programs and the CDC focusing on sentinel event reviews, overdose prevention, and public safety and health interventions. During her time at the Harvard Injury Control Research Center at Harvard University, she worked on the development of the National Violent Death Reporting System at the CDC. In 2005 she developed the Milwaukee Homicide Review Commission (MHRC), a real-time, multi-agency multi-disciplinary case review process, using data to drive policy for violence prevention, primarily firearm violence. Educating other jurisdictions on the MHRC process, Dr. O’Brien developed a national training and technical assistance curriculum for the US Department of Justice, Community Oriented Policing Services. In early 2016 she began the development of an overdose fatality review process for Wisconsin, bringing together the Wisconsin Department of Justice and the Wisconsin Department of Health Services. She is currently an Associate Scientist at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.



About the Presenter: Thomas Gilson, MD, is the chief medical examiner and Crime Laboratory Director of Cuyahoga County, located in Metropolitan Cleveland. Before assuming this position in 2011, Gilson served as chief medical examiner in Rhode Island. He is board-certified in Forensic Pathology and has over 25 years of experience as a practicing medical examiner. Gilson was awarded a Medical Doctor degree from The Medical College of Pennsylvania and served as a resident in anatomic and clinical pathology at the University of Cincinnati Pathology. He received his forensic training during a Fellowship with the Medical Examiner of New York City. Gilson's academic interests include the opioid crisis in the United States and the interface of forensic medicine with public health.



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Overdose Fatality Review Resources for Jurisdictions

Resource	Notes
Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Abuse Program (COSSAP) Overdose Fatality Review (OFR) Website	This resource hub houses all the information necessary to stand up a successful OFR: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training and Technical Assistance • OFR Peer Mentor Sites • 2021 Virtual National Forum Overdose Fatality Review • OFR Email Exchange • OFR Information Sharing Guidance
BJA COSSAP's Overdose Fatality Review: A Practitioner's Guide to Implementation	This toolkit provides comprehensive guidance on building a successful OFR process grounded in coalition, data collection, and prevention. It is organized into five modules: Recruiting Members, Planning Meetings, Facilitating Meetings, Collecting Data, and Building Recommendation Plans.
The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Foundation's Public Health and Safety Team (PHAST) Toolkit	This toolkit guides public health and safety teams in initiating, expanding, or enhancing overdose task forces, workgroups, coalitions, or collaboratives. It is broken into two modules: (1) Establishing and Maintaining a Public Health and Safety Team, and (2) Public Health and Public Safety Coordination.
Legislative Analysis and Public Policy Association (LAPPA)'s Model Overdose Fatality Review Teams Act	Supported by the Office of National Drug Control Policy, this document creates a legislative framework for establishing an overdose fatality review team. It is intended for informational purposes and does not constitute legal advice or opinion. For questions about this document or the information contained herein, please contact LAPPA via email at info@thelappa.org .

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