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Drug Overdose Prevention and Harm Reduction Services for Project Roomkey Residents during COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has coincided with a [national increase](#) in injuries and death related to opioid and other drug overdose. These two crises are likely related: COVID-19 has disrupted services for substance use disorder (SUD), including treatment and other support, and increased social isolation, which may mean that a person experiencing an overdose is less likely to be rescued. People with COVID-19 or other respiratory infections are more susceptible to fatal overdose.

People housed through Project Roomkey are of special concern as California works to prevent overdose deaths during the pandemic. People experiencing homelessness have higher population rates of SUD and drug-related mortality, with overdose as a leading cause of death.

In this letter, we encourage you to take three steps to prevent overdose at sites you oversee, and describe resources to support the health and safety of Project Roomkey residents who use drugs.

Step 1: Connect Residents with Overdose Education and Naloxone Distribution (OEND)

Distribution of the opioid overdose antidote naloxone (also known as Narcan) alongside first aid education is major component of California's efforts to reduce overdose deaths. Although naloxone is a prescription medication, California law allows it to be dispensed through standing order arrangements that do not require a physician or pharmacist to be present. Administered by a nasal spray or intramuscular injection, naloxone is simple to use, safe and nontoxic, and is highly effective at reversing opioid overdose. Because they are most likely to be present at the scene of an overdose, the majority of overdose reversals using naloxone are done by people who use drugs saving the lives of their peers, and therefore a basic element of OEND services is to prioritize naloxone distribution to people who use drugs.

Project Roomkey operators who wish to directly dispense naloxone to people who may witness and be able to respond to an overdose may do so by using the [statewide standing order](#) issued by the California Department of Public Health (CDPH). Naloxone may be obtained for free [from several sources](#), including the Department of Health Care Services [Naloxone Distribution Project](#). Training videos on naloxone and other first aid responses to overdose are [available from CDPH](#) and high quality private sources, including in [English](#) and [Spanish](#).

Step 2: Collaborate with Harm Reduction Organizations



Project Roomkey operators are encouraged to collaborate with any of the approximately 60 harm reduction organizations in California in order to support the safety of residents who use drugs. All harm reduction groups in the state provide OEND services, sterile syringe access and safe disposal, and most provide a variety of other services including counseling, linkage to SUD treatment services, HIV and viral hepatitis testing and care, and, during COVID-19, distribution of personal protective equipment. Most harm reduction programs in the state have continued to operate during COVID-19, and many provide outreach-based services that are already serving Project Roomkey residents in some areas.

A statewide [directory of harm reduction groups](#) may be found on the CDPH website along with [additional background](#) on syringe exchange and related services.

Step 3: Promote Access to Opioid Use Disorder Treatment

The federal government has significantly eased regulations governing access to medications for opioid use disorder in order to increase access during COVID-19, including through telehealth services. The medication buprenorphine (Suboxone) may now be prescribed remotely, and is effective at reducing opioid craving, overdose risk, and illicit drug use.

Local harm reduction organizations may be able to connect people with buprenorphine providers. Through the California Bridge Program, on-demand buprenorphine treatment services are available in dozens of emergency departments across the state; view a site directory [here](#). You may also use the California Substance Use Line (1-844-326-2626) or the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) [buprenorphine provider locator](#) to identify physicians in your area.

Thank you for the vital work you do, and if you have questions or need additional guidance in these matters please **contact Matt Curtis, Harm Reduction Specialist, CDPH Office of AIDS at matt.curtis@cdph.ca.gov**.