

TAKING ACTION & EXPLORING CHANGE TO BETTER PROMOTE DRUG USER HEALTH

Lay a foundation supportive of change

Changing practices first requires changing hearts and minds. When it comes to serving people who use drugs, organizations and individuals often have strong, long-held beliefs about the best way to do things. Change is difficult, takes time, and must be built on a strong foundation. The action items below are designed to support and sustain future change.

▶ Identify a champion

Identify one or a few people who can be champions within your organization, individuals with a passion for harm reduction and who build relevant expertise which they can then share with others.

▶ Build relationships & seek support externally

For providers in Baltimore City and BHSB subvendors, BHSB staff, including but not limited to BHSB's Director of Harm Reduction, Harm Reduction Team, and contract-specific Program Leads, may be resources available to you. Reach out to discuss your desire to take action and invite these and other external partners to brainstorm alongside you and offer support.

▶ Honestly assess where you stand

Examine your individual and organizational beliefs about serving people who use drugs. Compare them against principles outlined in **Tips Guide 1**. When there is discrepancy, acknowledge and discuss it. It's okay to express discomfort or hesitation to explore change.

▶ Deepen your knowledge

Refer to **Tips Guide 2** for learning resources that are available at no or low cost.

▶ Share your knowledge

Take advantage of opportunities to educate others. Share what you've learned. Invite others to learn with you. Where opportunities for others do not exist, work to create them. Ensure that learning is a group or organizational exercise and that its goal is to build consensus and openness to change.



DRUG USER HEALTH TIPS SERIES

This guide is part of a series for providers and community-based organizations to advance evidence-based, principles-aligned practices to support the health of people who use drugs.

The actions suggested in this guide are ways for providers, organizations, and individuals to apply the principles and practices detailed in this series. Those interested in better understanding those principles and practices, advancing their learning, and accessing additional resources prior to taking action should refer to other guides in this series.

Guide 1: *Practices that Promote Drug User Health & the Principles of Harm Reduction*

Guide 2: *Learning More about Drug User Health Promotion, Harm Reduction, and Putting Principles into Practice*

Behavioral Health System Baltimore receives funding from various sources and follows guidance regarding allowable costs, language use, and more. This guide (developed with non-federal funding) uses "harm reduction" interchangeably with other language such as "overdose prevention," "drug user health," and "participant-centered services". Our use of any term is not a recommendation to others to do the same.

▶ **Connect with your peers**

Join in-person or virtual spaces where your peers (individual or organizational) gather, such as meetings, social events, and email listservs. BHSB supports a network for Baltimore behavioral health (including drug user health) service providers. **Join the BHSB Email list** for monthly updates and to **attend quarterly provider meetings**. **Connect with BHSB's Provider Relations Team** at provider-relations@bhsbaltimore.org. Learn more at bhsbaltimore.org/for-providers/resources.

Review policies and procedures for alignment with core principles

Organizational culture and practices are often formalized through policies and procedures. Outdated or non-evidence-based ideas may be embedded in these documents, reinforcing practices that no longer align with best approaches. Reviewing these documents can help identify opportunities for revision so that organizational culture and day-to-day practices more closely align with core principles that support drug user health.

▶ **Ensure alignment with core principles**

Policies and procedures can be reviewed systematically, using the principles outlined in **Tips Guide 1** as a reference against which to compare. Opportunities for change might be flagged for discussion with colleagues or leadership. The Harm Reduction Fidelity & Classification Tool (HR-FaCT), available at strategicpeersolutions.com/hr-fact-framework-1, can be completed to generate a harm reduction fidelity score and identify opportunities for better alignment.

▶ **Examine practices which are not codified in policy**

Many organizations follow agreed upon practices which are not written down. The day-to-day processes may have a significant impact on the experience of people you serve. When reviewing policies and procedures, don't forget to consider practices which your organization follows but aren't in writing.

▶ **Consider codifying practices in writing when change areas are identified**

When practices which aren't written down are identified as opportunities for change, consider the exercise of writing them down as an ideal time to explore that potential for change and to become better aligned with the core principles outlined in **Tips Guide 1**.

▶ **Connect with model peer organizations to understand their practice**

Similar organizations may have already done some of this hard work. Learn from them and see what can be borrowed to avoid reinventing the wheel.

Improve engagement with people with living and lived experience

The people you serve are experts in their own individual experience and that of their communities. Learn from them and involve them in service planning, design, and delivery to ensure that programs and policies are grounded in the realities of drug use and the needs of your clients. Meaningful engagement builds trust, increases the relevance and effectiveness of services, and reflects organizational commitment to dignity, autonomy, and shared decision-making.

▶ **Solicit feedback from participants and use it to make changes**

Create regular, accessible opportunities for participants to share feedback—like surveys, listening sessions, or advisory groups—and ensure their input directly informs program improvements. Communicating back what changes were made helps build trust and shows that participant perspectives are valued. Every effort should be made to compensate participants for their time and expertise.

▶ **Employ people with living and lived experience**

Hiring people who use drugs or who have used drugs brings critical expertise that can strengthen outreach, program design, and service delivery. Their insight helps organizations better understand community needs, build trust with clients, and ensure services are practical and responsive. Historical employment practices can make such hiring challenging. Reference the Texas Harm Reduction Alliance’s **Nothing About Us Without Us: Building Workplaces By & For People Who Use Drugs** at drive.google.com/file/d/1yMXzdk5LznocSz947j2qzoyuNMkof5ft/view for helpful strategies to “create more equitable, supportive, and effective workplaces for people who use drugs.”

▶ **Acknowledge the value of living experience and understand how it differs from lived experience**

Living experience is held by people who are currently using drugs, while lived experience is typically held by people who have used drugs in the past. Both perspectives offer important knowledge, but including people with living experience ensures programs reflect the realities and needs of people who are actively navigating drug use and related systems today.

▶ **Transform workplace practices to support people with living and lived experience**

Organizations may need to revisit policies and workplace norms—such as hiring requirements, drug testing policies, or disciplinary practices—that can exclude or stigmatize people with drug use experience. Creating supportive, non-punitive environments helps ensure employees with living and lived experience can contribute meaningfully and safely. Well-supported staff are successful staff, and successful staff support clients to achieve better outcomes. Reference the **Guide for Organizations Employing People Who Use Drugs** at opensocietyfoundations.org/publications/harm-reduction-work for places to start.

▶ **Consider becoming a Recovery Friendly Workplace**

Recovery Friendly Workplace initiatives help organizations create environments that support employees affected by substance use and recovery. Approaches typically focus on reducing stigma, promoting supportive policies, and connecting employees to resources while maintaining a culture of respect and inclusion. Maryland has a robust **Recovery Friendly Workplace Program**. Learn more at labor.maryland.gov/employment/rfworkplace.shtml. Baltimore City employers can request additional local support by visiting baltimorecity.gov/moed/our-work/job-seekers/communities-grant-program.

Facilitate access to basic overdose prevention and drug user health supplies

Ensuring access to supplies for overdose prevention and that meet other basic needs of people who use drugs is a practical way for organizations to support the safety, dignity, and well-being of people who use drugs. Items like naloxone, safer use supplies, wound care materials, and drug checking tools can reduce immediate health risks and create opportunities to build trust and connection with participants.

▶ **Refer to an Overdose Response Program (ORP)**

Maryland ORPs provide naloxone, other supplies, and overdose prevention education at no cost. Find an authorized ORP at health.maryland.gov/pha/NALOXONE/Pages/Approved-Entities.aspx.

▶ **Refer to a mail-based program**

Mail order programs in Maryland offer access to overdose prevention and other supplies at no cost. Supplies are mailed discreetly to eligible mailing addresses. Participation requirements, available supplies, and delivery time vary by program. **BHSB operates a mail order program.** Learn more and request supplies at bhsbaltimore.org/mail-order. **Baltimore Harm Reduction Coalition operates a program.** Request supplies at nextdistro.org/maryland.

▶ **Write a prescription or refer to a pharmacy**

Naloxone remains available via prescription or for over-the-counter purchase. When prescribed, their may be copays for insured patients and cost may be prohibitive for uninsured patients. Over-the-counter naloxone may also be prohibitively expensive for clients. Pharmacists in Maryland can dispense prescribed naloxone under a statewide standing order, but this is subject to pharmacy stocking. Both over-the-counter and pharmacist dispensed naloxone may be out of stock at some pharmacies.

▶ **Become an ORP**

Authorized Maryland ORPs are eligible to receive naloxone and other supplies at no cost from the Maryland Department of Health. For organizations with a prescriber and dedicated staff to manage ORP application, training, dispensing, reporting, and biannual reauthorization processes, applying for authorization may be a good option. For those that do not, partnering with or referring clients to an existing ORP may be more feasible.

Engage in advocacy with and for the people you serve

Engaging in advocacy with and for the people you serve helps address the structural barriers—such as policy, stigma, and access—that shape drug-related harm beyond the scope which can be addressed by providing direct services. Partnering with participants to elevate their voices and priorities reflects a commitment to dignity, autonomy, and self-directed approaches while driving more just and effective systems change.

▶ **Connect with the Maryland Harm Reduction Action Network**

Advocates from across the state communicate, coordinate, and find community on a statewide listserv. To join, email md-harm-redux+managers@googlegroups.com or sign into a Gmail account then visit groups.google.com/u/0/g/md-harm-redux and click "Ask to join".

▶ **Engage with the work of BHSB's Policy Team**

Visit bhsbaltimore.org/get-involved/advocate to learn about BHSB's advocacy work, read our current policy priorities, and sign up for policy email alerts by entering your email under "Stay Up to Date".

▶ **Solicit client input and act on it together**

Ask your clients what changes they want to see, what barriers exist for them, and how you can help. Amplify their voice, center their experience in your work, find opportunities for them to speak directly on their own behalf, and act upon what they've told you.