



## Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Substance Use Disorders

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed every aspect of our society but the disadvantaged and underserved communities are likely the most affected. This pandemic has led to a public health crisis which has highlighted the systemic weakness in a system that has neglected the neediest population for too long.

Individuals with substance use disorders are some of the most neglected populations in our society. This neglect is more pronounced by the coronavirus crisis. Substance use, including the opioid crisis and HIV, combined with the coexisting crisis of COVID-19 is creating a vicious circle and compounded by policies that are put in place to contain the spread of the virus. Situations such as the total or partial lockdown across the country, the unprecedented demand for existing healthcare facilities, loss of family members and loved ones, social and sometimes emotional distancing, job loss, general anxiety created by a state of panic, increased domestic violence as reported by several news organizations, and many other situations have created a waterfall of events that substantially increase the urgency for substance use and abuse, ultimately leading to an increase in drug overdoses.

A recent report by Nora Volkow, M.D., Director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) has validated the dire impact of COVID-19 on substance abuse. The report indicated that over 49,000 people in North Carolina received substance use treatment each day since the virus reached a national level and more than 400,000 people in the state have misused opioids within the last month. Over 1 million people are without medical insurance in that state.<sup>1</sup> This dismal picture is not typical to NC alone. It unfortunately reflects a trend throughout the United States.

A statement from the Greater Cincinnati area suggests that people in the area are dying of drug overdoses at double the rate than before the pandemic. The first 10 days of June witnessed 25 overdoses. Statistics from the Cincinnati Health Department show that Cincinnati is one of the cities in Ohio showing an upward swing in both SUD incidents and prevalence of COVID-19 since the lockdown was eased. As of this writing, a total of 2,867 COVID cases are reported in Cincinnati with 68 deaths so far. Appropriately 15 new cases are seen daily, even with the low testing rate.<sup>2</sup> This is alarming.

The Central Community Health Board of Hamilton County and Harbor in Toledo recognized the need to continue to offer a continuum of care to patients. In early March 2020, the two agencies began work on a business continuity plan to operate amid the coronavirus crisis. By utilizing their experiences from building a telehealth platform over the last 8 years, the transition was seamless. Critical services are delivered through an expanded tele-psychiatry and tele-therapy service delivery model. The majority of staff work from home using digital technology such as tele phone and/or tele video to connect with patients. If needed, the equipment is loaned to patients so they can continue to receive services without disruption.

Amid COVID-19, CCHB and Harbor are fortunate to have the capacity to continue to provide services to the Cincinnati and Hamilton County Community. Specifically, the Early Prevention and Intervention Program staff innovatively deliver HIV and opioid/methadone education virtually to both individuals and groups. The focus of this program is to provide training and education to identified substance abuse clients to aid in preventing the transmission of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and tuberculosis. Research has demonstrated that people with SUD are at increased risk for acquiring and transmitting HIV, both as a result of sharing injection equipment and because substance use may increase the likelihood of impulsive sex and sex without use of condoms or other HIV prevention tools.<sup>3</sup> CCHB's EPIP services include outreach, information dissemination, risk management, prevention, education, intervention support groups, patient services, staff training, advocacy and system development.

As we embrace new strategies and the new normal for servicing Cincinnati and Hamilton County residents, we look forward to meeting the needs of our patients in ways that are professional, comfortable and convenient while still meeting all regulatory requirements for service delivery.

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Market References:

<sup>2</sup> Cincinnati Health Department: <https://www.cincinnati-oh.gov/health/covid-19/>

<sup>3</sup> National Institute on Drug Abuse: Nora's Blog, Research at the Intersection of HIV with Substance Use Disorders amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic, July 28, 2020.