

Best Practice Guide for News Media
Substance Use Disorder, Stigma, Treatment with Medication, Overdose

Introduction

Substance use affects everyone – individuals, families, and communities in West Virginia have all felt the impact. Stereotypes and misperceptions about substance use are common. Often, news reports focus on the shocking and harsh impact of substance use disorders, sensationalizing the issue and the individuals and communities involved, and invoking blame, shame, and stigma.

Journalists can play an important role in the way they cover and report on issues relating to substance use in West Virginia. The work of journalists educates professionals as well as the general public about topics such as opioid use disorder and overdose; and promotes awareness about related topical issues such as treatment with medication.

Treatment and recovery from substance use disorders requires individuals and communities to work together. News stories that educate, empower, and highlight pathways to treatment help dismantle barriers of discrimination. Emphasizing access to care and available resources will help encourage individuals with disorders, such as opioid use disorders, to seek treatment and lead healthy, productive, dignified lives.

Guidelines for Reporting

This guide was developed to describe how journalists can influence public policy and reduce stigma and discrimination against individuals with substance use disorder (SUD) and opioid use disorder (OUD). Moreover, journalists can raise awareness about the availability of quality treatment in local communities and how to access it.

By expanding the focus of their story to inclusion, empathy, and compassion, journalists can create a positive impact on substance use prevention, treatment, and recovery in West Virginia.

Know the Facts

- There are many credible, reliable resources at the state and federal levels to obtain SUD/OUD research, statistics, and facts.
- In West Virginia, the WV Department of Health and Human Resources collects data to post on their various program websites. The WVDHHR provides a wide range of necessary and life-saving services to WV residents.
 - The WVDHHR Bureau for Behavioral Health (BBH) is the federally designated Single State Authority (SSA) for mental health and substance use disorder. BBH provides planning, direction, training, and funding for prevention, treatment, and recovery services throughout the state. BBH's website offers links and resources for recovery resources, information for families, and tools for prevention, treatment, and recovery. <https://dhhr.wv.gov/programs/Pages/Bureau-for->

[Behavioral-Health-and%20Health%20Facilities.aspx](#)

- Use these links to view WV DHHR reports and statistics on Opioid Use Disorder and related topics:
 - Drug overdose rates and fatalities <https://dhhr.wv.gov/bph>
 - Overdose deaths historical
https://dhhr.wv.gov/oeps/disease/ob/documents/opioid/wv-drug-overdoses-2001_2015.pdf
 - Outbreak report: Opioid Related Overdose Huntington August 2016
<http://dhhr.wv.gov/oeps/disease/ob/documents/opioid/opioid-overdose-outbreak-report.pdf>
 - 2016 Overdose Fatality Analysis <https://dhhr.wv.gov/bph>
 - 2016 Overdose Fatality Analysis link for Overdose Fatality Analysis Power Point:
<https://dhhr.wv.gov/bph/Documents/ODCP%20Reports%202017/2016%20WV%20Overdose%20Fatality%20Analysis.pdf>
 - Substance Use Frequency <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/report/2016-2017-nsduh-state-specific-tables>
 - Substance Use During Pregnancy <http://www.wvdhhr.org/wvprams/>
 - Adult Substance Use <http://www.wvdhhr.org/bph/hsc/statserv/BRFSS.asp>
 - College Age Substance Use http://www.acha-ncha.org/reports_ACHA-NCHAIc.html
 - High School & Middle School Substance Use
<http://wvde.state.wv.us/healthyschools/YRBS.html>
 - WV Substance Use <https://helpandhopewv.org/resources.html>
 - Opioid Prescribing Indicators by County
<https://helpandhopewv.org/resources.html>
 - Medicare Part D Opioid Prescribing Rates <https://cms-oeda.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=c688b54ed3484d4f8870d4b5e4a941e9>
 - WV Opioid Response Plan Recommendations <https://dhhr.wv.gov/bph>
 - Harm Reduction Program Information <https://dhhr.wv.gov/bph>
 - Map of Harm Reduction Program Sites <https://dhhr.wv.gov/bph>
 - Overdose Prevention Naloxone Administration Data by County
<http://wvpoisoncenter.org/about-us/annual-report/>
 - General Prevention Resources <https://helpandhopewv.org/resources.html>
 - Medical Cannabis <https://dhhr.wv.gov/bph/Pages/Medical-Cannabis-Program.asp>
 - Recovery Stories and Stigma <https://stigmafreewv.org/>
- This article from the *Columbia Journalism Review* presents four facts every journalist can use when writing about opioids. *The four facts: 1. Repeated opioid use causes rapid, observable changes in the brain. 2. There are highly effective treatments for opioid addiction. 3. The goal of addiction treatment is to restore a person's ability to lead*

a meaningful life, function productively, and stay alive. 4. A person might have an addiction, but this does not make him or her “an addict.” The full article at this link (below) expands on each of the four facts. *Columbia Journalism Review: Four facts every journalist should know when covering the opioid epidemic.*
https://www.cjr.org/local_news/opioid-journalist-advice.php?

- At the federal level is the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) <https://www.samhsa.gov/>. SAMHSA is the agency within the US Department of Health and Human Services that leads public health efforts to advance the behavioral health of the country. SAMHSA’s mission is to reduce the impact of substance use disorder and mental illness in America’s communities.

Reporting Guidelines

These reporting guidelines are based on similar nationally-recognized guidelines developed for journalists reporting on suicide prevention, child abuse prevention, and behavioral health.

- Report about OUD in a straightforward manner so it does not appear to be exciting.
- Provide accurate depictions of individuals with a substance use disorder that avoids sensationalizing.
- Whenever possible, present examples of positive outcomes of treatment and recovery.
- Counter misperceptions, prejudice, and negative beliefs that are often associated with OUD.
- Reporting SUD news fairly and accurately creates an environment where people feel supported and willing to seek/receive treatment.
- Avoid speculation and generalizations that the substance use disorder explains unusual behaviors.
- Ensure the source that provides the SUD diagnosis is authorized to do so.
- Describe the subject of your report as an individual first. Example: “An individual who has a substance use disorder.”
- Report SUD facts. Know and research credible resources such as the CDC, NIH, WHO, SAMHSA, WVDHHR, etc.
- Always present crisis hotline numbers and treatment and counseling resources, and relevant websites. Research local resources and report them in your story.
- Refer to substance use disorders as medical conditions that people can talk about in a supportive way. *“As a result of scientific research, we know that addiction is a medical disorder that affects the brain and changes behavior.”¹*
- Always highlight treatment opportunities. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) reported in 2015 that close to 20 million people in need of substance use treatment did not receive it. Further, in that same year, an estimated 11.8 million people reported an unmet need for mental health care. *“... people suffering from either substance use and mental disorders, or both, because of their illness are often excluded from the current health care system and instead have to rely on “public safety net” programs. The gap in service to this population unnecessarily jeopardizes the*

health and wellness of people and causes a ripple effect in costs to American communities.²

Our Words Make a Difference

“Stigma is a perceived negative attribute that causes someone to devalue or think less of the whole person. Stigma can be defined as prejudicial attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and even discrimination against people with substance use disorders or other behavioral health issues.”³

Most individuals with substance use disorder fear being judged and/or experiencing discrimination. They often shy away from getting the help they need. Pregnant women with SUD may not seek prenatal care for fear of being placed into the child welfare system. Stigma disproportionately influences health and safety outcomes.

Addressing stigma often begins with the words we use. Our language makes a difference. Journalists may be unaware of the influence their words have on individuals with a substance use disorder and the public at large.

By simply changing the words we use, individuals with SUD may perceive themselves differently. They may recognize their condition as a medical disorder instead of a bad choice they’ve made. They may experience hope – they may reach out for help or seek the treatment they need.

Some examples of alternate words to use related to SUD:

Current (stigmatizing) language	Alternate (non-stigmatizing) words
Substance abuse, drug habit, or drug problem	Substance use disorder
Drug abuser	Person with substance use disorder
Addict	Person with substance use disorder
Substitution/replacement treatment, i.e. methadone/suboxone maintenance	Treatment with medication
Clean/dirty (re: drug screen results)	Positive or negative
Clean/sober	Abstinent, not actively using
Relapse	Recurrence
Former addict	Person in recovery
Infants born addicted – opioid babies	Neonatal abstinence syndrome

Sources

1. National Institute on Drug Abuse. (July 2018). Retrieved on February 14, 2019 from <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugs-brains-behavior-science-addiction/preface>
2. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) <https://www.samhsa.gov/about-us/who-we-are>
3. StigmaFreeWV <https://stigmafreewv.org/what-is-stigma/>

Additional Resources

SAMHSA's Center for the Application of Prevention Technologies – Words Matter: How Language Choice Can Reduce Stigma <https://www.samhsa.gov/capt/sites/default/files/resources/sud-stigma-tool.pdf>

The Society of Professional Journalists - Journalist's Toolbox - <https://www.journaliststoolbox.org/tag/journalists-guide-to-covering-suicide/>

The International Journalists' Network <https://ijnet.org/en/story/guidelines-reporting-about-suicide>

Center for Journalism Ethics - A Guide to Responsible Reporting on Suicide <https://ijnet.org/en/story/guidelines-reporting-about-suicide>

Reporting on Suicide <http://reportingonsuicide.org/>

Columbia Journalism Review – Four facts every journalist should know when covering the opioid epidemic. https://www.cjr.org/local_news/opioid-journalist-advice.php?

CDC's Suggested Practices for Journalists Reporting on Child Abuse and Neglect <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/childmaltreatment/journalists-guide.pdf>

The Carter Center Journalism Resource Guide on Behavioral Health https://www.nj.gov/humanservices/dmhas/initiatives/trauma/Carter_Center_Journalism_Resource_Guide_BH.pdf

National Institute of Mental Health <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/index.shtml>

National Institute on Drug Abuse <https://www.drugabuse.gov/>

World Health Organization <https://www.who.int/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention <https://www.cdc.gov/>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration <https://www.samhsa.gov/>

Mental Health America <http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/>

National Institute of Mental Health <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/>

National Institute on Drug Abuse. DrugFacts: Understanding Drug Abuse and Addiction. <http://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/understanding-drug-abuse-addiction#references>

Drug overdose rates and fatalities <https://dhhr.wv.gov/bph>

Overdose deaths historical https://dhhr.wv.gov/oeps/disease/ob/documents/opioid/wv-drug-overdoses-2001_2015.pdf

Outbreak report: Opioid Related Overdose Huntington August 2016

<http://dhhr.wv.gov/oeps/disease/ob/documents/opioid/opioid-overdose-outbreak-report.pdf>

2016 Overdose Fatality Analysis <https://dhhr.wv.gov/bph>

2016 Overdose Fatality Analysis link for Overdose Fatality Analysis Power Point:

<https://dhhr.wv.gov/bph/Documents/ODCP%20Reports%202017/2016%20WV%20Overdose%20Fatality%20Analysis.pdf>

Substance Use Frequency <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/report/2015-2016-nsduh-state-specific-tables>