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"Examining the Implementation of Police-Assisted Referral Programs for Substance Use Disorder Services in Massachusetts"

Research Objective

What are the key components of these programs and strategies used to implement them?

Key Themes Identified

Program development is an ongoing process
Partnerships between police departments and community stakeholders were essential for starting and sustaining a program
High-level leadership mattered
Program success was defined in multiple ways
Programs contributed to shifts in beliefs about substance use and addiction among police officers

Seeing addiction as a disease "mellows you" and makes you realize, "This is not a crime we're dealing with. We're dealing with people that do have an earnest problem. And it's affecting not just them, personally, but it's affecting their families."

Methods

Partnered with the Police Assisted Addiction and Recovery Initiative (PAARI) to recruit participants for focus groups. Conducted six focus groups with 33 individuals across five communities.

Sample

5 police chiefs, 12 police officers, 6 outreach workers, 4 community-based organization directors, 2 interns, 1 clinician, 1 program manager, 1 religious representative, and 1 prevention specialist.

Themes Explored

Program shifts included the following: 1) Relying more on outreach workers to conduct post-overdose outreach. Most often these were recovery coaches who had lived experience with addiction and were trained in coaching-based models of peer recovery support. 2) Adopting a collaborative model that included weekly stakeholder meetings, structured decision-making to categorize individuals with what they called "acutely elevated risk," and conduct outreach visits to those meeting this criteria. 3) A shift toward harm reduction. 4) A shift toward more long-term engagement.

"I think the very first thing you need to do, whatever community is looking to start this, you have to identify who your partners would be" (police officer).

"If you send the message in your department that, as the chief, you would want to support this . . . that really sends the message" (police chief).

Meeting people where they are became a measure of success.

TAKEAWAYS

The development of police-assisted referral programs represents an example of communities coming together to implement innovative solutions to complex problems, perhaps summed up best in the words of one police chief, who said, "Society's changing. The whole world realizes that. Incarceration isn't the answer to addiction, it's not the answer . . . But we're changing as society's changing, because we mirror our society."

Sources: Davoust, M., Grim, V., Hunter, A., Jones, D. K., Rosenbloom, D., Stein, M. D., & Drainoni, M. L. (2021). Examining the implementation of police-assisted referral programs for substance use disorder services in Massachusetts. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 92, 103142.