

## The CENTER Initiative

*Community ENgagement, Trauma, Equity, and Renewal  
to CENTER People Who Use Drugs*

**Title:** Improving Access to Naloxone in St. Louis in Public Housing

### **Context:**

The City of St. Louis faces one of the nation's highest overdose death rates, which disproportionately affects Black males. Between February 5th and February 7th, 2022,, nine individuals fell victim to fentanyl-tainted cocaine overdoses at the Parkview Apartments in St. Louis, Missouri, representing the deadliest mass overdose event in St. Louis history. Parkview Apartments are a 295-unit public housing site owned by the St. Louis Public Housing Authority, managed by The Habitat Company, and funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

### **Partnerships:**

The CENTER Initiative, founded in 2021 and funded through the Missouri Foundation for Health, is an academic-community collaboration with the mission to reduce overdose, confront the impact of trauma, and invest in the long-term wellbeing of Black people most impacted by addiction, drug use, and overdose in St. Louis. Core partners include The University of Missouri-St. Louis-Missouri Institute of Mental Health (UMSL-MIMH), St. Louis County Department of Public Health, Family Care Health Centers, a federally qualified health center, and The T, a grassroots harm reduction service provider.

Following the mass overdose event, The CENTER Initiative and regional partners established a collaboration with the St. Louis Housing Authority to distribute naloxone directly to residents of the Parkview Apartments and provide overdose recognition and response training for housing residents and property managers. To develop and launch such an effort, four entities were necessary: 1) a group to provide a substantial, steady, and no-cost naloxone supply; 2) individual trainers to offer large group and individual overdose education and naloxone trainings; 3) individuals to conduct door-to-door outreach within the Parkview complex; and 4) a body with the influence and decision-making capacity to change local public housing policy, the St. Louis Housing Authority.

### **Implementation Strategies:**

After the mass overdose event at Parkview Apartments, CENTER team members and close collaborators spent months connecting with the appropriate staff within the property management company and housing authority. CENTER staff and the Executive Director of the St. Louis Housing Authority collectively established and endorsed an action plan for overdose education and naloxone distribution efforts. Investing time in regular cross-organizational meetings to build partnership was critical to distributing naloxone on-site in a responsive, organized way.

Following this, Community Health Workers from Family Care Health Centers came on-site at Parkview Apartments on a consistent weekly schedule to distribute naloxone. Distribution also occurred via tabling events, seasonal resource fairs, and door-to-door outreach. These proved effective ways to give out naloxone, provide brief instruction on how to use it, and answer any

## The CENTER Initiative

*Community ENgagement, Trauma, Equity, and Renewal  
to CENTER People Who Use Drugs*

questions that arose. Connecting with residents individually helped promote feelings of privacy and confidentiality, which likely contributed to more resident trust and interest in naloxone. Supported through funding from Missouri's State Opioid Response grant and other federal and

state funding sources, UMSL-MIMH provided no-cost nasal and intramuscular naloxone for this effort, with the goal of saturating the Parkview Apartment complex with naloxone.

UMSL-MIMH trainers and community consultants provided in-person and virtual group training for both residents and property staff. They delivered interactive presentations covering overdose risk factors, signs, reversal strategies, and broader information on drug use harm reduction principles and practices. Providing education is key to ensuring individuals do not just possess naloxone, but know what overdose looks like and what to do when an event occurs. A local pastor and harm reduction consultant provided a safe space for property management staff specifically to address their concerns with the recent overdoses and substance use in the building. These trainings and supplies were framed as not only a tool to help their residents, but a tool to make properties safer.

### **Key Insights & Overcoming Challenges:**

There are challenges to naloxone distribution in a public housing context. These challenges are largely rooted in stigma and criminalization related to drug use. The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988 and the Cranston-Gonzalez National Affordable Housing Act of 1990 both restrict drug-related activity on or near public housing grounds, leading to immediate eviction. These punitive measures can create an environment of fear among residents, deterring them from acquiring naloxone for friends or family members. These can also create an environment of fear among property management, who have legitimate concerns about liability and risk-management.

Support from the St. Louis Housing Authority was vital in launching and sustaining an overdose education and naloxone distribution program within Parkview Apartments. With current zero tolerance policies related to drug use in public housing settings, having public approval from the Housing Authority gave property management and residents the confidence to adopt naloxone and associated training and education without risk of liability or loss of secure housing.

Another pivotal component of this effort has been the Community Health Workers consistently conducting outreach and meeting with residents. In addition to providing overdose prevention-related education and supplies, they also enroll residents in Medicaid and primary care health services and provide other resources to assist with health and well-being. Their presence with local residents adds holistic elements of trust and connection in this programming, both of which have been critical to its reception.

Finally, intentional framing of naloxone distribution and education has been key to its uptake within Parkview Apartments. Educational materials and training content centers a public health framework, championing naloxone as a safe, standard tool that should be present in all households, regardless of personal drug use. Materials prioritize person-centered language and strategies that raise awareness about the many pathways to recovery and wellness. Naloxone distribution is not conditional to enrollment in drug treatment or other services, but discreetly available to any resident.

## The CENTER Initiative

*Community ENgagement, Trauma, Equity, and Renewal*  
to CENTER People Who Use Drugs

### **Conclusion:**

There is ample evidence highlighting the benefit of stable housing for everyone in our communities. Incorporating no-questions-asked overdose education and naloxone distribution in public housing settings is one strategy for getting life-saving tools into the hands of people living in settings where there is a high risk of overdose in the community. However, current federal laws may have a chilling effect on many public housing staff and residents, limiting uptake of these programs. Specific legislative and regulatory changes to protect public housing residents are desperately needed. In the meantime, local housing authorities, tenant advisory boards, and resident champions should work with naloxone distribution and training programs in their area to implement overdose prevention programs where they live and work.