



RELATIONSHIP IS THE INTERVENTION: HOW HARM REDUCTION BUILDS AUTONOMY, ENGAGEMENT, AND TRUST IN YOUNG ADULTS

CREATING CONDITIONS FOR CONNECTION IN HEALTHCARE SPACES

Agenda



WHAT IS
HAPPENING



WHAT IS THE
PROBLEM



WHERE ARE
THE GAPS



WHAT DID WE
DO ABOUT



FINAL TIPS &
TAKEAWAYS

What is happening?

Youth development is a time of major change



Youth and young adulthood is a time for risk-taking

There is a strong drive for new
experiences

Self-control is still catching up



The brain is balancing two things:

A highly reactive reward system

A still-developing decision-making system

WHAT IS HAPPENING?

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IS A TIME OF MAJOR CHANGE

- Perception shapes behavior
 - Developing brains respond more to perceived risk vs. actual risk
 - If something *feels* safe → use/behavior increases
 - If risk feels exaggerated → warnings are ignored
- Risk-taking is part of development, not just poor choices
 - This is how we learn what is safe

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

THE HEALTHCARE SYSTEM ISN'T WORKING FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

- Healthcare expects independence, but isn't build to support it
 - Limited guidance navigating care
 - Expected to be part of a system they were never taught to use
- Young people are often Feeling unheard or dismissed
 - Turning to peers or the internet for health information instead
 - Delay or avoid seeking help
 - As a result, they may defer decisions, avoid care, or distrust providers
 - Not out of apathy, but due to a lack of tools and safety in decision-making.

ADAPTING TO WHAT IS AVAILABLE

- When safe, supportive ways to explore risk aren't available, people use what they have
 - Young people's behavior reflects what's available to them
- Substance use can reflect unmet needs, stress, or a lack of alternatives
 - Trying to regulate, cope, or connect
 - Stigma in healthcare can reinforce shame and push people further away
 - Works both ways – People who use drugs (PWUD) fear being stigmatized by healthcare providers and medical providers express fear of being deceived by PWUD

WHERE DO WE SEE THE GAPS?

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES FOR CARE, CONNECTION, AND LIFE-SAVING INTERVENTION

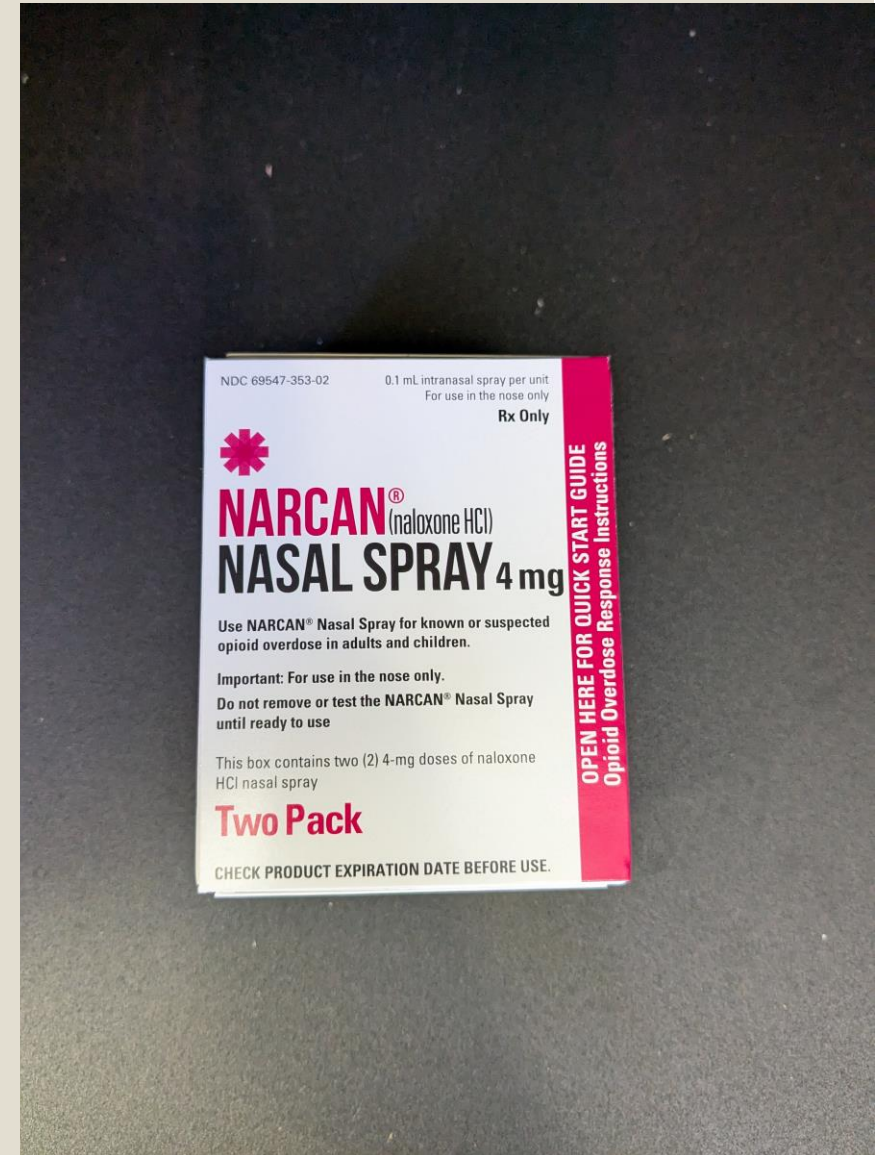
- When systems don't meet people where they're at, we lose trust, time, and lives
- Inadequate Follow Up
 - Patients receive inadequate care connection or follow up after being discharged from medical settings leading to more fatal overdoses

SO,
WHAT
DID WE
DO
ABOUT
IT?



What is harm reduction?

- Harm reduction meets people where they are and focuses on reducing harm, not requiring abstinence.
 - Practical, real-world strategies
 - Builds trust and keeps people engaged
 - Supports safer choices at any stage
 - Grounded in dignity, autonomy, and respect





THE COUNTY'S FIRST HARM REDUCTION VENDING MACHINE

How it reduces barriers

- Free and anonymous
- No staff interaction required
- 3 questions with preloaded answer options for minimal data collection

Supplies Include

- Naloxone
- Fentanyl & Xylazine test strips
- Safer use and health supplies
- Basic needs support

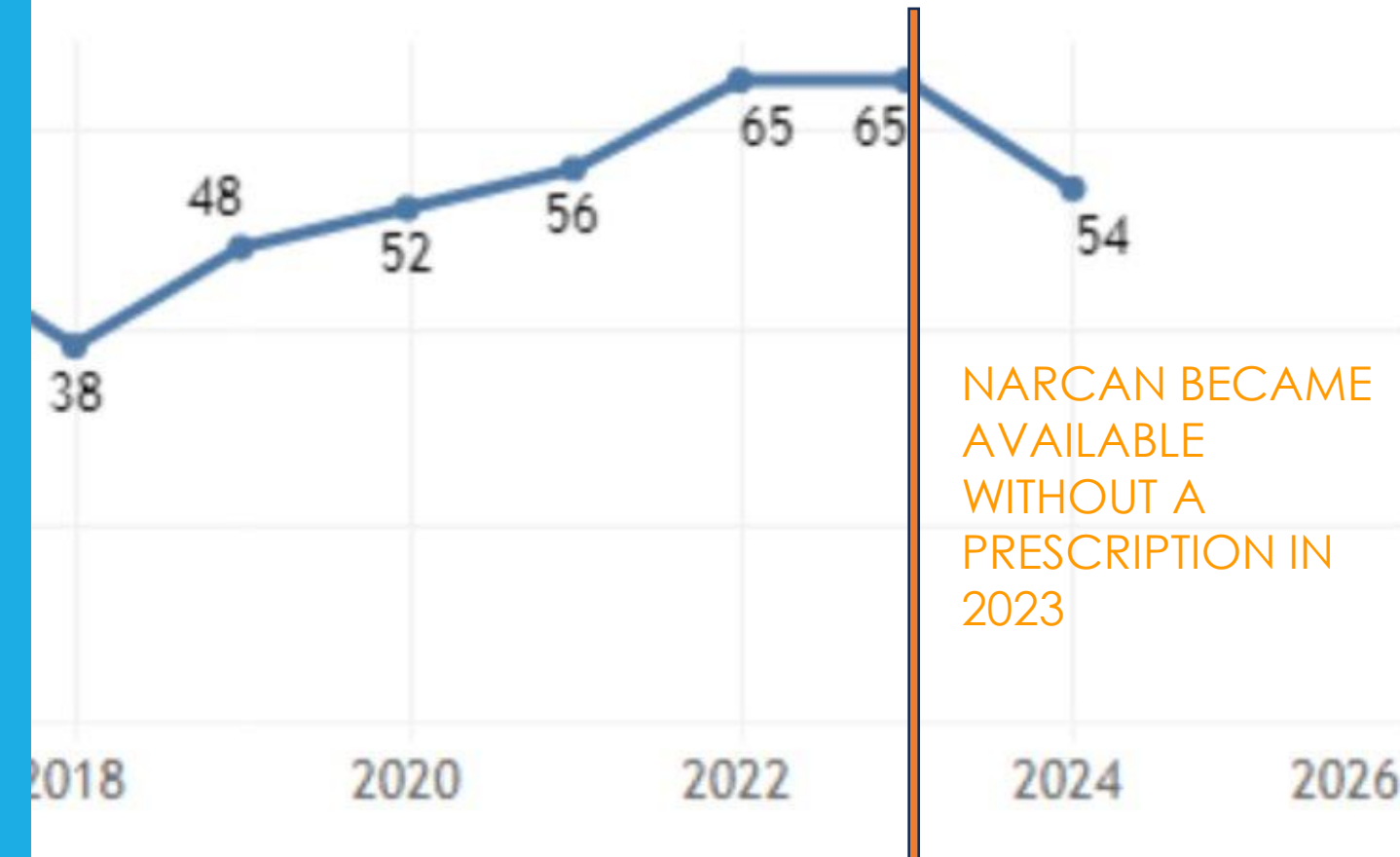
How does Harm Reduction promote autonomy?

- Respecting individual choice
 - Provides tools for informed decisions
- Empowerment through engagement
 - Centers goals and promotes self-directed change
- Kindness and compassion as strategies
 - Reduces shame and builds trust
- Lived experience at the center
 - “Nothing about us without us”

Drug Overdose deaths in Boulder County 2018 – 2024

THOUSANDS OF NARCAN
KITS PROVIDED BY:

- SYRINGE SERVICE PROGRAMS
- HARM REDUCTION VENDING MACHINES



COLORADO

**Center for Health
& Environmental Data**

Department of Public Health & Environment

- Joint effort in obtaining machine
 - Clinica Family Health & Wellness
 - Boulder Rotary
- Multiple funding sources
 - Fundraising efforts
 - County-sanctioned opioid abatement dollars
- Input sought from community partners on highest needs
 - Boulder County Public Health syringe service program
 - Boulder County AIDS Project - also provides syringe access

How did this
come to be?
Community
collaboration

PILLAR Program



The BCH PILLAR Program

- A service unique to this hospital that can connect with patients all along the continuum of care
 - Primarily grant funded
- Embedded within the hospital system and maintaining strong partnerships with community providers, the program helps create individualized care pathways that reduce barriers, promote engagement, and support long-term wellness
- Nonjudgmental, person-centered support that addresses both medical and social needs
- An in-road to resources and care

Final Tips & Take-Aways: Relationship-Centered Strategies



Young people need support, not surveillance



Low-barrier access points build trust over time



Meeting people with real choice invites curiosity



Risk-taking is normal - harm reduction meets it with safety, not shame



Engagement through harm reduction increases likelihood of accessing treatment 5x

THANK YOU

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