

# Spotlight 2.05 *The Role of Harm Reduction in Addressing Homelessness*

**INNOVATIONS & SOLUTIONS**  
for Ending Unsheltered Homelessness

March 4-6, 2024

San Francisco, CA

#NAEH2024

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Homelessness and substance use sometimes coexist. When an individual experiences both, the likelihood of seeking help or the ability to engage in services can be affected by public stigma. Harm reduction focuses on working with people without judgement, coercion, discrimination and does not require an individual to stop using as a precondition of support. Studies show strategies like needle exchange, methadone maintenance and supervised injection services are effective in reaching and linking those in need of housing and social supports, and peer support is an important principle in harm reduction approaches.



**H**OMELESS &  
**H**OUSING  
**R**ESOURCE  
**C**ENTER

# The Role of Harm Reduction in Addressing Homelessness

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Jen Elder, Director

SAMHSA Homeless and Housing Resource Center

March 5, 2024

Innovations and Solutions for Ending Unsheltered Homelessness  
Conference

# Disclaimer

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The **Homeless and Housing Resource Center** is a program operated by Policy Research, Inc. and developed under grant 1H79SM083003-01 from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Interviews, policies, and opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of SAMHSA or HHS.



# Why Harm Reduction?

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*“Harm reduction saved my life. When I was still actively using, I used the needle exchange. Looking back, I’m so grateful for it. I can’t imagine what would have happened to me without it. Narcan<sup>®</sup> saved my life so many times. It’s such a blessing. I really hope we can continue to expand harm reduction services.”*

*—Julia Mullins, Service Provider and Person in Recovery,  
Kentucky*

*Quoted in HHRC’s Whole-Person Care for Opioid Use Disorder Toolkit and Online Course*



# What is Harm Reduction?



- Focuses on minimizing the *harm* associated with substance use
- Meets people where they are and measures success not by sobriety but by positive behavior change, no matter how small
- Recognizes the limitations of forcing someone into sobriety and honors a person's autonomy in deciding their own path and timeline
- Means we believe that all people are capable of change and will do so when they are ready and when their circumstances allow
- Harm reduction interventions focus on keeping people safe, healthy, and alive



# Harm Reduction Strategies

- Needle exchanges/syringe service programs (SSPs)
- Naloxone (Narcan) distribution and education
- Fentanyl and xylazine test strips
- Safer use supply kits: safer smoking kits, nicotine cessation therapies, sterile water and saline, wound care supplies, safer sex kits, etc.
- Pre-exposure prophylaxis, or PrEP, to prevent HIV
- Hotlines for supervised use (e.g., Never Use Alone)
- Education on safer use, such as not using while alone or not mixing substances

# Considerations for Unsheltered Environments

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- Strategies should be informed, led, and evaluated by people with lived expertise
  - Where are services/resources needed? What is needed?
- Availability of naloxone and safer use supplies in public spaces
  - Outreach teams, mobile SSPs, libraries, community centers
  - Anonymous options: harm reduction vending machines (or similar), syringe drop boxes
- Impact of encampment sweeps
  - Reduces access to safer use supplies, overdose prevention, and social supports



# HHRC Harm Reduction Resources

## Online Courses

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- Introduction to Treatment Models and Engagement
- Supporting People Who Use Methamphetamine
- Whole-Person Care for Opioid Use Disorder
- Trauma-Informed Outreach and Engagement

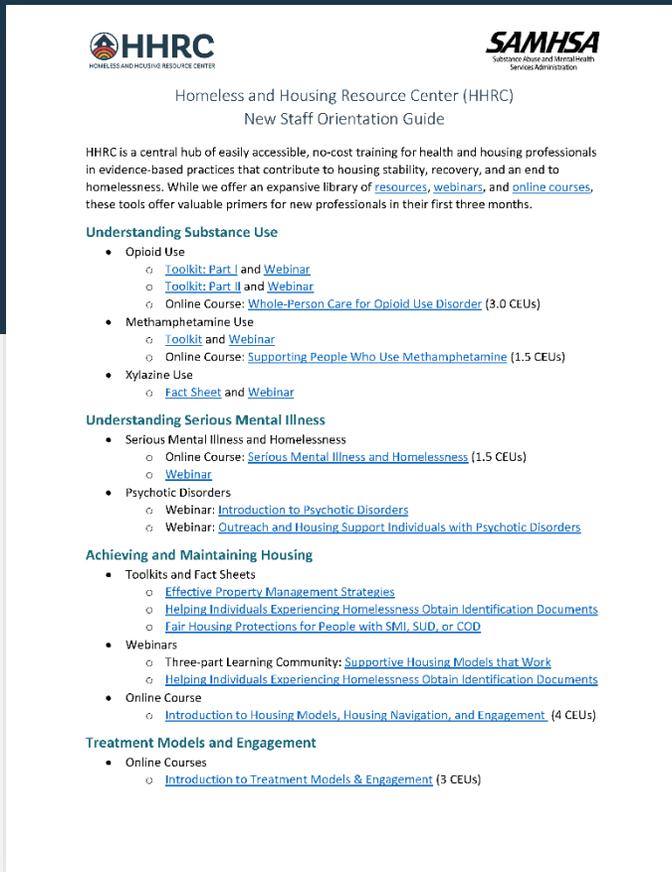
All courses are free, self-paced, and accredited for CEUs

## Toolkits/Webinars

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- Xylazine Basics: Overdose Prevention, Harm Reduction, and Wound Care
- Guide to Methamphetamine Use, Treatment, and Housing Considerations for People Experiencing Homelessness
- Whole-person Care for Opioid Use Disorder
- Boosting the Power of Harm Reduction (systems-level approaches)

# Exploring HHRC Resources



The screenshot shows the top portion of a document titled "New Staff Orientation Guide" from the Homeless and Housing Resource Center (HHRC), which is part of SAMHSA's Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. The document includes logos for HHRC and SAMHSA. The main text describes HHRC as a central hub for training and resources. It lists several categories of resources:

- Understanding Substance Use**
  - Opioid Use
    - Toolkit: Part I and Webinar
    - Toolkit: Part II and Webinar
    - Online Course: [Whole-Person Care for Opioid Use Disorder](#) (3.0 CEUs)
  - Methamphetamine Use
    - Toolkit and Webinar
    - Online Course: [Supporting People Who Use Methamphetamine](#) (1.5 CEUs)
  - Xylazine Use
    - Fact Sheet and Webinar
- Understanding Serious Mental Illness**
  - Serious Mental Illness and Homelessness
    - Online Course: [Serious Mental Illness and Homelessness](#) (1.5 CEUs)
    - Webinar
  - Psychotic Disorders
    - Webinar: [Introduction to Psychotic Disorders](#)
    - Webinar: [Outreach and Housing Support Individuals with Psychotic Disorders](#)
- Achieving and Maintaining Housing**
  - Toolkits and Fact Sheets
    - [Effective Property Management Strategies](#)
    - [Helping Individuals Experiencing Homelessness Obtain Identification Documents](#)
    - [Fair Housing Protections for People with SMI, SUD, or COD](#)
  - Webinars
    - Three-part Learning Community: [Supportive Housing Models that Work](#)
    - [Helping Individuals Experiencing Homelessness Obtain Identification Documents](#)
  - Online Course
    - [Introduction to Housing Models, Housing Navigation, and Engagement](#) (4 CEUs)
- Treatment Models and Engagement**
  - Online Courses
    - [Introduction to Treatment Models & Engagement](#) (3 CEUs)

- [New Staff Orientation Guide](#)
  - Recommended HHRC training for onboarding new staff
- [Join the HHRC listserv](#)
  - Monthly newsletters
  - Announcements of new HHRC training and resources
  - Highlight resources and events from partners
- Questions: [info@hhrctraining.org](mailto:info@hhrctraining.org)



# Integrating Harm Reduction into Programs for People Experiencing Homelessness

## NAEH Conference 2024

**Melissa Matheney (she/her)**

Training and Development Manager  
Matheney@harmreduction.org



National Harm Reduction Coalition creates spaces for **dialogue and action** that help heal the harms caused by racialized drug policies.



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Policy &  
Advocacy



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National & Regional  
Conferences



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Trainings &  
Technical  
Assistance



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Overdose  
Prevention



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Resources &  
Publications

## The Importance of Language in Harm Reduction

Language plays a crucial role in establishing rapport with participants. By using person-first language in our intake forms & conversations, we separate the individual from their behavior/health status and create a more welcoming environment

Stigmatized

Person-first  
Language

Drug addict



Person who uses drugs

Prostitute



Person who does sex work

Drug problem



Substance use disorder

Clean/Sober



Abstinence

Crazy



Person living w/ mental health issues

Infected w/ HIV



Person living w/ HIV



NARCAN

NOT NARCANT



Integrating Principles into Programs  
for Participants

**NATIONAL**  
**HARM REDUCTION**  
**COALITION**

## Participant-Centered Services

- Participant-led goals vs case manager led
- Needs established by population rather than agency
- **Asks** instead of **assumes**

## Participant Autonomy

- Honors inherent wisdom of participants in decision-making process
- Discovers solutions **WITH** participant instead of **FOR** participant
- Empowers participants by highlighting strengths and resources to navigate challenges

## Participant Involvement

- Creates spaces for participant feedback via community meetings, surveys & creation of participant-councils to actively inform policy and design of programs w/ the populations they serve

## Health and Dignity

Meets participant where they are & prioritizes health & dignity over necessity of changing behaviors before intervention occurs

## Pragmatic and Realistic

- Discusses potential harms + benefits of risky behaviors using tools such as cost/benefits worksheets to empower participants to make informed decisions regarding where they are in their lives

## Sociocultural Factors

Recognizes what people bring with them- culture, trauma, poverty, substance use, incarceration history, and seeks to make programs accessible for all



**NATIONAL  
HARM REDUCTION  
COALITION**

What's the best way to communicate with you when you are triggered/activated?

What helps you feel grounded when you are upset?

What strategies have you been using to keep yourself safe so far?

**Questions for participants that honor the principles of harm reduction**

What parts of the program do you enjoy/what parts would you change?

What supplies would you like to see us carry on outreach?

What goals do you have for our case management relationship?

**NATIONAL  
HARM REDUCTION  
COALITION**



Supporting Staff through Harm Reduction

**NATIONAL  
HARM REDUCTION  
COALITION**

Responding to and bearing witness to traumatic events can bring up a range of emotions.

Some common emotions people experience are...

- Fear
- Sadness
- Powerlessness
- Anger
- Grief
- Hypervigilance
- Numbness
- Guilt



People have different timelines for emotional processing. These feelings may be felt instantly, in the days/weeks following, or for an extended period of time. There is no 'right' way to process emotions and no timeline for healing

# Supporting staff impacted by traumatic experiences

Our work is traumatic, but we don't need to be traumatized! By using harm reduction, we can build successful programs for participants and staff alike while reducing burnout and staff turnover

## Some ways to support staff:

- Normalizing emotions and complex feelings
- Debriefing incident after staff has time to process
- Having regular clinical supervision for staff individually and as a group as part of agency infrastructure
- Offering the day off with pay, or the next day off if incident occurs at end of shift
- Educate staff on SDI and ways to take paid leave to take care of themselves

# Questions & Comments

## **Jen Elder**

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**THANK YOU!**

Questions & Comments

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HARM REDUCTION  
COALITION**

# Thank You!

*SAMHSA's Homeless and Housing Resource Center provides high-quality, no-cost training for health and housing professionals in evidence-based practices that contributes to housing stability, recovery, and an end to homelessness.*

## Contact Us:

<https://hhrctraining.org/>

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518-439-7415x4



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***SAMHSA***  
Substance Abuse and Mental Health  
Services Administration