



## MESSAGING PLAYBOOK

# CITY RESIDENTS SUPPORT PUBLIC HEALTH APPROACHES to drug use, homelessness, and community safety

In this playbook (also published [on our website](#)), learn what city residents believe about drug use, homelessness, and community safety – and how to further solidify support for public health solutions.



The Big Cities Health Coalition (BCHC) polled residents in its member jurisdictions – that is, 35 of the largest urban areas in the U.S., or about one-fifth of the American population – about their views on strategies to prevent overdose. Results show there is **continued broad support for a public health approach** to these challenges in 2025, just as our [2024 polling](#) revealed.

Our 2025 poll focused on **specific overdose prevention tools** (often referred to collectively as harm reduction)

such as naloxone and fentanyl test strips distribution, and the availability of overdose prevention centers.

We learned that city residents **broadly support the use of these tools**, especially where they see a clear connection to **saving lives** and providing drug users with a **bridge to recovery**.

Polling highlighted that **first-person stories** from people who have benefited from these resources, particularly when told in **video format**, are effective for strengthening public support.

BCHC partnered with Hart Research on the polling design and analysis.

The results are based on an online survey with 1,004 respondents, a representative sample across BCHC's 35 member cities conducted in March 2025.

Credibility interval is  $\pm 3.09$  percentage points for the full sample.

*Photo credit: Minneapolis Health Department employee restocks a harm reduction kiosk*

# THE WINNING MESSAGES

City residents chose the following messages as their top reasons to support a public health approach to drug overdose.

Respondents highlighted the **phrases marked here in green** as particularly positive or compelling.

## Part of a complete strategy

There are multiple causes behind the overdose crisis, so we need a **complete strategy** that includes **short-term** and **long-term solutions**. Cities that accept this reality are making real progress by embracing a complete strategy that includes saving lives in the short term with naloxone, fentanyl test strips, and overdose prevention centers, while in the long term, **expanding mental health** and substance use **treatment options**, increasing **affordable housing**, and creating more well-paying **jobs**.

## Bridge to recovery

Not everyone will be ready for treatment to help them overcome an addiction. But we all know how much someone's **circumstances can change** in a month or a year, and by then they may be more willing to accept help. These actions give people the chance to get to that next day, next month, or next year so they can get help when they are ready to.

## Saving lives

Let's face it: people didn't start using drugs because naloxone and fentanyl test strips are available. But they are living to see another day because naloxone and fentanyl test strips are available. That's another day when health workers can get them the help they need, including appropriate treatment.

## Safety tool

We're surrounded by all sorts of danger every day and we keep tools on hand to **protect** us in case the worst happens. Fastening our seat belt **protects** us in a car accident. Keeping smoke alarms working in our homes protects us in case of fire. Similarly, making naloxone and fentanyl test strips available to people who use drugs and other actions like these can **save someone's life** if they overdose.



**The City of Boston**, as part of a multi-sector partnership, has developed the [Live Long and Well Agenda](#), which “aims to improve life expectancy and reduce racial and ethnic health disparities.” This effort spans cardiometabolic diseases and cancers; infant, maternal and older adult health; mental and behavioral health; and substance use disorders (SUDs). In the latter category, the city is expanding its work to prevent substance use as well as help those already living with SUDs. This issue has particularly affected Black and Latinx residents of Boston, with these communities experiencing higher rates of both fatal and non-fatal drug overdoses compared to white residents.

The city has also taken concrete action to transition people from tents to [temporary housing with low barriers for entry](#). (The facility run by the Boston Public Health Commission is pictured above.) This approach — rooted in proven, evidence-based strategies — supports and provides critical services to people with a substance use disorder. This important work today is the **first step toward long-term housing solutions and better health outcomes**. The city now has six highly accessible sites with 200 total beds. Each location provides medical care, substance use disorder treatment, and housing navigation services to ensure a successful transition.

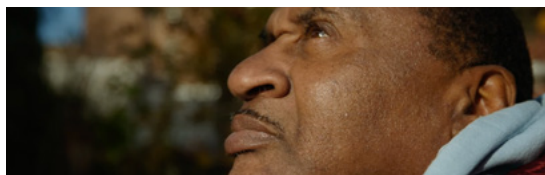
# MORE MESSAGING STRATEGIES

Along with our winning messages, these strategic messaging recommendations can help deepen city residents' support for public health approaches to overdose prevention.

1

## Emphasize how public health prevents overdose, saves lives.

Voters find credible and compelling the lives saved via public health approaches to overdose — this impact should be the centerpiece of all communications.



2

## Share faces and stories of real people who have been helped by overdose prevention work.

In our survey, [short videos](#) of people telling their own stories of how they benefited from harm reduction drove nearly all the movement toward support for overdose prevention actions. Voters want policies that treat people who use drugs as human beings, so illustrating the real-world impacts of a public health approach to overdose prevention is compelling and transformative, especially for voters who are ambivalent about harm reduction.

3

## Center other benefits of public health approaches to overdose that city residents support.

Namely, call out how they: treat people who use drugs as human beings who deserve our help; help people stay alive and offer a bridge to recovery for when they are ready to receive help; and are part of a complete strategy that saves lives and provides a bridge to recovery in the short-term, while also investing in longer-term solutions such as mental health supports, affordable housing, and more well-paying jobs.



The **City of San Francisco's** Street Medicine program brings medical care directly to unsheltered people. This street-based outreach and engagement is rooted in relationship development and patient-centered care. It streamlines [access to short-term needs](#) — from overdose follow-up and wound care to food vouchers and haircuts — while also [linking people to substance use treatment](#), mental health services, case management, and much more. Once urgent patient needs are stabilized, the team helps them progress into more traditional primary care that [strengthens their foundation](#) going forward.



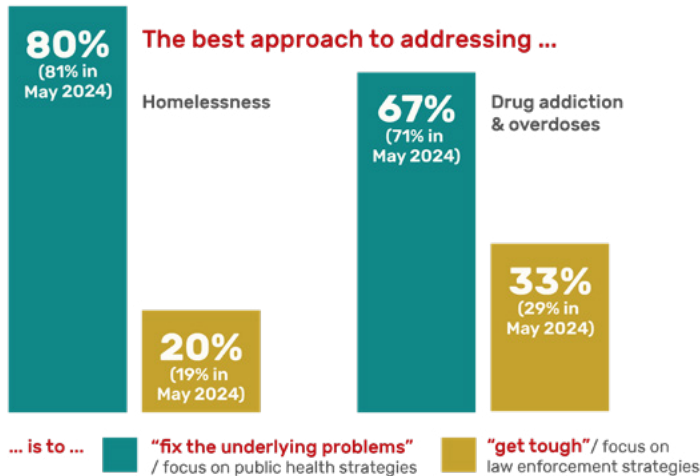
**Maricopa County** — which serves Phoenix and surrounding communities — is investing \$2 million of its opioid settlement funds to support 12 local organizations that serve community members with education, prevention, and treatment services.

One such effort, [Live and Learn Arizona](#), is designed to increase participation in the Women Building Resiliency program which helps provide low-income women with a “structured pathway to maintain sobriety, develop economic self-sufficiency, and achieve long-term sustainable stability.” ([Watch April's story](#) of resiliency that she built through this program.)

This proactive approach acts now and into the future by [pairing treatment services with skills that can yield sustained economic improvement](#).



# INSIGHTS INTO ATTITUDES

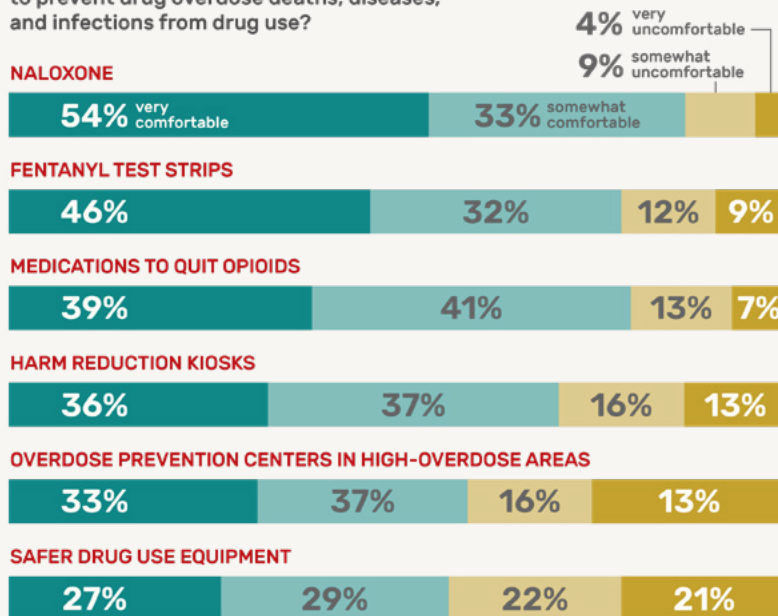


1

## Support for a public health approach to overdose prevention remains strong.

City residents are very concerned about homelessness, drug use, and crime – *and* they are convinced by a 2-to-1 margin that solving these issues must involve “fixing the foundations” rather than “getting tough.” Polling from 2024 had similar findings.

### How comfortable are you with these actions to prevent drug overdose deaths, diseases, and infections from drug use?



2

## Public support for overdose prevention strategies is broad but not yet deeply held.

Support generally for overdose prevention and for specific tools – such as naloxone or medications to treat addiction – is broad, but not deep. While nearly 8 in 10 city residents support the use of these tools, only a third say they “definitely” support their use. Naloxone has the strongest support.

### What do you see as the top benefits of overdose prevention?

Numbers represent percent who listed each benefit in their top 3



3

## Residents view saving lives, treating people who use drugs as human beings, and providing a bridge to recovery as the top benefits of overdose prevention strategies.

The prospect of saving lives is an particularly strong motivator for those who express only soft support for overdose prevention tools.

# RESPONDING TO “ENABLING” CRITICISM

Drug overdose deaths in big cities have more than tripled in the past decade. In response, many city governments have made services available without requiring people to stop using drugs before receiving support. Harm reduction is a public health approach to drug use. Some city residents criticize harm reduction as “enabling” drug use. Our research identified two effective responses to that criticism:

1

Harm reduction ensures people have immediate access to proven, evidence-based strategies for reducing drug overdoses and other drug-related health harms, as cities rally the resources to fund housing and the full scope of supportive services we need long term.

2

Harm reduction treats people who use drugs as people, rather than as criminals, and reduces the chance that they will die or experience serious health issues before getting any help they may need. We cannot make the people we love stop using drugs, but we can give them the opportunity for a longer, healthier life.

## POLICY NEXT STEPS



**\$55  
billion**

amount awarded to states and localities from opioid-related lawsuits

City residents support investing in proven public health strategies.

Local policymakers should look to their health department for expert guidance on how to wisely invest opioid settlement dollars. Also see the [resource compendium](#) created by Prevention Institute, BCHC, and other partners.

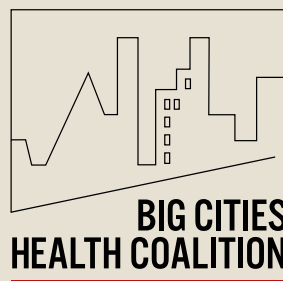


**Seattle & King County** health officials have established a series of initiatives to “prevent overdoses, **save lives, and clear paths to recovery** for all.” These efforts address the urgent needs of individuals, while also steering those same people to longer-term support systems that can improve individual and community health.

Designated Crisis Responders and Emergency Service Patrols in the county respond to tens of thousands of calls annually, leading to mental health evaluations and, when needed, **transportation to temporary housing, sobering centers or treatment.**

Public communication campaigns broadly educate county residents about overdose prevention and stigma, while targeted training in communities with particularly high risk or burden brings actionable information where it is needed most.

The Big Cities Health Coalition is a forum for the leaders of America’s largest metropolitan health departments to exchange strategies and jointly address issues to promote and protect the health and safety of their residents. Collectively, BCHC’s 35 member jurisdictions directly impact more than 61 million people, or 1 in 5 Americans. [bigcitieshealth.org](https://bigcitieshealth.org)



## Learn more

View more recommendations on our site:  
[bigcitieshealth.org/overdose-prevention-messaging-2025](https://bigcitieshealth.org/overdose-prevention-messaging-2025)

## Contact us

Send questions to [info@bigcitieshealth.org](mailto:info@bigcitieshealth.org)