
2024

WEXFORD COUNTY

FOCUS GROUP REPORT:

Substance Use Disorder:
Recovery, Stigma, and
Community

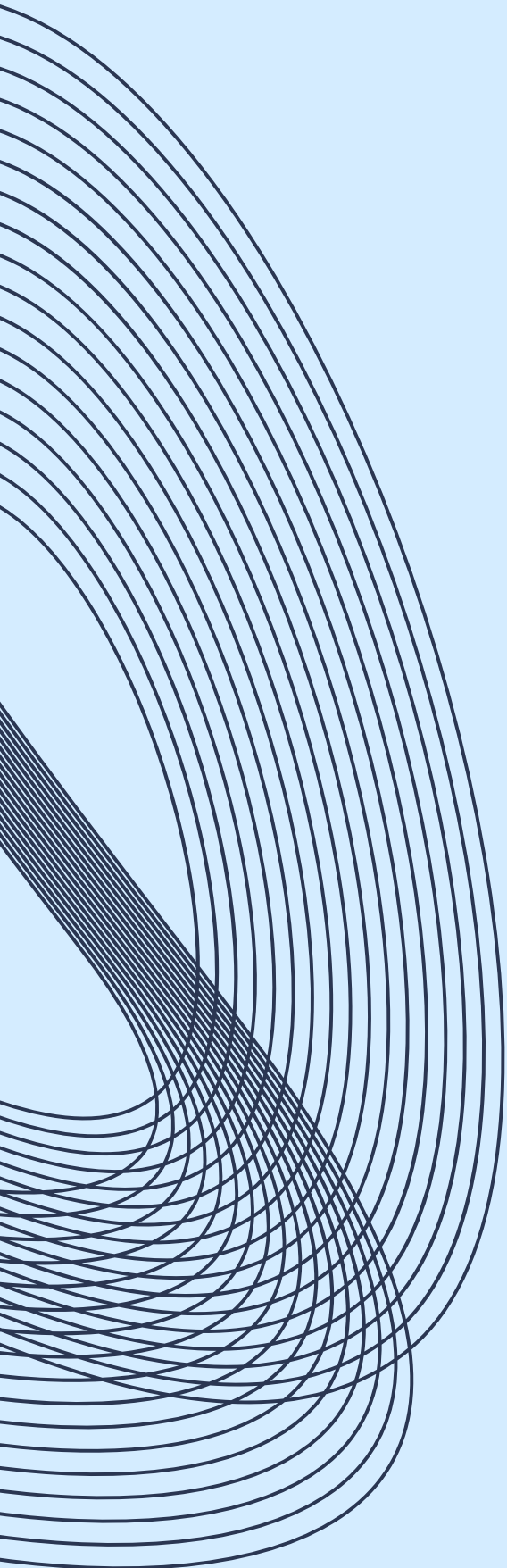


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If you would like to learn more about this work, please email us at dnorkoli@dhd10.org

REPORT SUMMARY

About the Substance Use Stigma Assessment and Response Project

Funding from NACCHO, Northwest Community Health Innovation Region Behavioral Health Initiative, and District Health Department #10 (DHD#10) allowed staff to conduct focus groups in Manistee County, Wexford County, and Grand Traverse County for individuals in recovery.

The purpose of this report is to summarize and analyze the Wexford County focus group findings to identify the next steps to help individuals within our community.

FOCUS GROUP

Overview

The purpose of a focus group is to hear from individuals in the community to learn first hand from their experiences. This helps provide insight to barriers they may face, resources they may need, and how to best support them within the community.

The focus group involved individuals from Wexford County and was made up of six individuals who are in recovery for substance use. For the purpose of this focus group, a person in recovery is defined as being in the process of change to improve their health and wellness, live a self directed life, and strive to reach their full potential. From SAMHA's working definition of recovery.



METHODOLOGY

Planning and Recruitment

Direct recruiting with the help of internal contacts was used to help assemble the focus groups. Each focus group was limited to 10 participants.

Individuals were recruited based on their history of SUD.

Focus group participants received a \$50 gift card as compensation for their time and participation.

METHODOLOGY

Data Cleaning and Analysis Process

The focus group was recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Word Transcribe function.

Clean Transcripts

The text was reviewed for any errors to ensure accuracy, clarity, and consistency. Any formatting errors were corrected and any identifiable information was removed including names of individuals and professionals.

Highlight Important Quotes

Once the transcript was cleaned, quotes were pulled out that were important to capture any main topic areas for each question asked.

Finding Themes

Themes were found for each question that was asked to the individuals. Quotes are also highlighted for each of these themes. Overall themes from the focus group are shared as well.

FINDINGS

Reasons for Beginning Substance Use

The individuals were asked about their reasons for initially beginning substance use. Here are the common themes that were found:

Lack of Activities in Area

Individuals reported not having any activities within the area, especially ones that don't involve drugs or alcohol in some way. This contributed to boredom that some participants said led to their use of substances.

- "I would say boredom, boredom and peer pressure. I mean, that's what got me going."
- "There's nothing around here, you know what I mean? And it's a small community and I don't know, it just seemed like everybody else was doing it so."

Ease of Access to Substances

Many participants shared how easy it was for them to get substances.

- "This is a drug hub. You can get meth here cheaper here than you can in Saginaw."
- "My kid just called me to the kitchen the other day and she said mom, look at this. I go and looking out the kitchen window, there's a drug deal happen right in my driveway, someone that doesn't even live in my apartment."

"It was easier to get meth than it was to go to the psychiatrist"

FINDINGS

Reasons for Beginning Substance Use

- "...when I started it was because I was raising 4 kids by myself, didn't have time to go... It was easier to get meth than it was to go to the psychiatrist. I can't take my kids to the psychiatrist with me. I can have dope dropped at my house. So it's easier to self-medicate and like that's why I started."
- "I've had, like, I've been in every facet of addiction that you can possibly think of. Like, I'm serious. From inhalants to you know what I mean? Everything like I've done it all"

Trauma

Multiple participants described trauma, including during childhood, adulthood, and just overall trauma as a main reason for beginning substance use. Past traumatic experiences led to using substances as a coping mechanism.

- "For me, it was trauma, I guess, and family dynamics, my family parties all the time. Like we grew up on ball fields. Everybody was always drinking and it wasn't abnormal for us to be taking care of the adults once it was past 11:00, because everybody was wasted, but that was normal to me."
- "I got off the marching band bus one day and found out that my dad had passed away. And for... that is when everything started for me, like at 13, I started drinking alcohol."

FINDINGS

Reasons for Beginning Substance Use

- "I had found myself in a domestic violence relationship and it had gotten really bad and my family had called Child Protective Services on me and they started getting on me like, what's going on in this household? And I could only run for so long and I ended up leaving my kids with my mom and checking myself into detox"
- "...they took my kids from me and I started injecting drugs and like, I figured, I just thought that it was over"

Young Age Beginning Substance Use

Individuals shared started using substances at very young ages. They also identified a progression of drug use.

- "But I mean, and we were doing it young like I was 12 years old when I dropped my first hit of acid. So like and that was here in Cadillac, you know, I mean, not like Detroit or nothing like that right here."
- "... at 13, I started drinking alcohol...And then I was smoking crack by 14 and it just it was like it escalated very quickly. But it's like you guys said, you know, the peer pressure and having people around and the easy access to it, I could walk right into the gas station. It was "midget market" at 15 and buy 1/2 gallon of vodka without an ID, they'd sell it to me."

FINDINGS

Reasons for Beginning Substance Use

- "I started my relationship with like rehabilitation services at like I don't know 13... I was 17 and went to jail for 90 days and and and did, did nothing. Still doing drugs, still drinking."

Culture and Social Environment

Multiple participants shared how their social environment with family and friends influenced their substance use. Some participants also shared family history of substance use and mental health conditions.

- "I think everybody else that was in my group, we'd have 50-60 people in the woods every weekend partying until and then you wake up in a field somewhere and then do it again the next day. You know, it was like it was normal and it makes me wonder where the hell were all our parents really"
- "I was gone for weeks at a time like literally 13-14 years old."
- "I missed 76 days unexcused in 90 days (of school)."
- "I'm gonna go somewhere else because I couldn't say no to the people around me"
- "My mom has issues that she will not even admit to. My parents were Alcoholics that they will never admit to. My aunts and uncles, alcoholism and addiction run deep my family."

FINDINGS

Reasons for Beginning Substance Use

- "And then the same thing my grandpa had bipolar. He had PTSD. He had mental health stuff. And same with my dad's side. There was stuff that was going on then. But you don't talk about that because mental health is not mental health. You control that. And if you can't control that, then That's on you. You know, that's just how my family operates. It's it's stigma within the family, you know?"

Mental Health

Individuals shared their experiences with mental health and the role it has played in their use of substances.

- "I started because of mental health too. Like I was trying to balance school and work and was having, like, really bad panic attacks... I just pulled over to the side of the road just to try to take a breather. And there was this guy out there, he offered Heroin to me, I was 28 for the first time."
- "I was like suicidal. So, I ended up in partial hospitalization and that's where I was actually diagnosed with bipolar disorder amongst like six or seven other disorders, mental health disorders."
- "...it got to the point where I had a suicide note written because I didn't know how to get out of it. I didn't know how to stop doing what I was doing..."

FINDINGS

Reasons for Beginning Substance Use

- "And then when I finally was able to go get help, they wouldn't help me with my problems because I have an addiction problem. I actually didn't start getting treated for my ADHD until I went to rehab and they started me on meds for it because they wouldn't do it because of my addiction."
- "Like I had a complete mental breakdown in 2021. I went to Psych hospital and everything and started getting mental health help. But I was, I still like, I went back to using afterwards and stuff because it was, it made me feel better than the meds they were giving me yeah."
- "I wasn't diagnosed bipolar yet, and so I learned through getting help with my mental health that like, I was trying to like, cope with my mania, like because I was manic all the time... was experiencing lots of manic episodes and so I was drinking alcohol to calm down."
- "I did the worst thing possible and started injecting drugs like, and I had to forgive myself for that."

FINDINGS

Finding Recovery Services

The individuals were asked about when they decided to find recovery services and how they found services. Here is what they shared:

Lack of Help Received

Many individuals shared the lack of help they received from organizations, their resistance to rehabilitation, the need to self advocate, and lack of staff.

- "...it wasn't until I got in trouble that I actually got help because I like came to Catholic Human Services, they did an evaluation and we're like how.. Like, how have they not like... what do you mean, they haven't helped you."
- "...going to jail in April, was realizing, so I was getting my second and third possession charge and it was that knock on the head of like, what the fuck are you doing? So I went back to rehab for the second time"
- "I just got in trouble, and then I came here to CHS and got on the maintenance program and I'm still on it. It's been a couple of years so..."
- "I had to advocate a lot for myself, and CPS was no help at all. You know, there was no resources available to me. I had to pay for my own drug test to prove that I was sober. I found a Home group and I did a 12 step program and that saved my life."

FINDINGS

Finding Recovery Services

- “The only thing that saved me and helped me was that I had jail diversion from CMH. They helped me a little bit but when you guys try to make all those calls from that jail cell because you have to do it all and then you have to get the CO to get the paperwork out, the fax machine and give it to you and then you have to fill it out and then and hope it's right and then you have to give it back to the CO and hope that they fax in a timely manner and then all the calls and everything go through the jail. So you got to hope that they're answering the phone for when it rings and. And it's a... it's a hellacious process... and they need a better system for helping people.”
- “There's staffing issues everywhere when it comes to social work. You know, so they can only do what they can do too. So. And but I didn't really understand that until now, like on the other side of it, you know what I mean? But when you're in there. And everything is happening outside that you have no access to. Like that alone is freaking traumatizing...”

Lack of Medication Education

Individuals shared their lack of education in regards to certain medications they became addicted to or proper medications to treat mental health conditions.

FINDINGS

Finding Recovery Services

- "I ended up being in detox for, like almost eight days because I was prescribed Xanax. I didn't know that you could get addicted. I didn't even know I could be addicted to Xanax. So I have like, a really pretty severe Xanax addiction too"
- "...when the psychiatrist, put me on meds and was like just, so, you know, like this is going to substitute the alcohol because you're self-medicating and now we're gonna medicate you appropriately. So like that knowledge..."

FINDINGS

Difficulties Receiving Treatment

When asked about the steps they took to find and receive treatment, participants expressed many struggles they faced due to reasons such as barriers to care and long wait times.

Barriers to Treatment and Care

Individuals shared a variety of barriers they faced when trying to find treatment including transportation, childcare, being out of work, cost, and not qualifying for services.

- "I had sought services before then but like CMH denied me repeatedly even though, like I didn't have like money to pay for services and out of pocket, mental health services are really expensive."
- "I know a lot of people who tried to do the process of going to treatment from jail and gave up and just did their jail time because they they didn't want to go through the hassle trying to get it taken care of."
- "if you're just using stimulants, you don't qualify to go into detox which is like that's a huge barrier for people with stimulant use disorder."
- "Transportation was a big one for me."
- "...having somebody to watch my kids, you know, I literally had to sign off power of attorney to my mom."

FINDINGS

Difficulties Receiving Treatment

- "And I was trying to make ends meet and I didn't have gas to make it to meetings. I knew I needed to go to meetings. I knew I needed the things. But being in the middle of nowhere, I didn't have the resources to be able to keep myself from doing that."
- "I wasn't getting paid. So like I literally like was getting help and my mental health was good, but like. I like had to like, beg, borrow and like, steal from people. To like have like get help."
- "...work. I lost my job"
- "I've literally gone to jail and because I didn't have nobody to answer, the phone"
- "who are incarcerated, who have been even though they're in a contained environment, they don't qualify for treatment after they've been there past a certain period of time."
- "they won't give you Suboxone in the jails."

Quality of Care

Individuals shared positive and negative experiences with the quality of treatment they received.

- "But I won't ever go back. I would rather. Like I would rather self harm... Because they didn't listen to me."

FINDINGS

Difficulties Receiving Treatment

- "We had gotten there and there was a couple of girls that was that were in my group and they had absolutely nothing like they had the clothes on their back. That was it. And they're like pretty much look at the donation bin whenever there is what you get and like it was like a laundry basket with a bunch of old, ratty clothes in it."
- "The rehab I went to was amazing. They have a case manager that helps you navigate everything your counselor helps you navigate everything. So like they help you find housing. They help you find work before you go home. Like it's so really good rehab that I went to."

FINDINGS

Community Views on SUD

Participants were asked about their experiences in the community and if they are treated differently due to having a substance use disorder. They struggles with stigma in the community including officers, employers, and medical professionals.

Medical Community Stigma

Many individuals had faced stigma from medical staff and had difficulty receiving the care they needed. They often felt unheard by medical professionals when discussing their health.

- "They don't listen, so they won't help me because I did drugs."
- "And that's when I got medicated and was able to, like, start advocating for myself and like, actually do what I needed to do to get help. Because like before that, like, there wasn't anybody helping me. So, like, literally getting in trouble with the law is the only reason like. I was able to get help."
- "My psychiatrist to this day does not listen to me. My nurse here is the only reason like I have medication that actually works for me"
- "I didn't my first time. I didn't like my therapist. She was rude to me. She said I was I was drug seeking."

FINDINGS

Community Views on SUD

- "it's hard to find a doctor that you can just be straight up with. And I told him what was up and at one point I had did a urine test where it came back that I had some kind of benzo in my system. And I was honest about my past and I was out of medication that I had to be drug tested more and they dropped me right away."

Community Stigma

Participants shared their experiences from law enforcement and employers.

- "If you care what other people think, you're never going to, you're never going to go anywhere... I didn't use my supports because I was too worried about the judgment. So I just fell back into it and finally I was just like you know what, I don't care what people think."
- "I felt like a sore toe walking into {Name of town redacted}, today, asking them for donations of pizza... And but it's like because it's regarding addiction and overdose and, like, the kickback that I feel from that, I already know that this is going to go one way or the other. It's going to be a heck yes. Or get out of my store."

FINDINGS

Community Views on SUD

- "I got pulled over by a police officer. You know, I was like, I got anything in here. It's the first thing they ask me all the time. And no, because. I do. I you know, I have my own background and my own my own stuff, but it's like. I don't know why does it have to be the first question that you asked me all the time. You know, like it's been 988 years. Like why is that the first thing that comes out of your mouth? I feel like that alone is stigmatizing..."
- "I literally overdose in the bathroom and my friend that got me the job she came in the bathroom like there's a whole bunch of people in the bathroom, like HR My boss... Like, I opened the door and she's sitting there behind my back telling drug test him drug test him and ... He's going to hate you...and then we have to pay for him to go to rehab because their insurance, {name removed}, they would have to pay for me... And then they fired me for being late"
- "Cause the the cops were at my window looking in my window, which they weren't at the door knocking like they're supposed to. They were sneaking around my freaking house, and they were looking in the window."

FINDINGS

Community Views on SUD

"Officers around here, you know I've never been aggressive towards them. Anytime they've arrested me, I've always been cordial with them. So like the cops. Hang on and addict, obviously because they've been arresting me for 20 some years, but they never. I never felt like they treated me like garbage. You know what I mean? They've always treated me with respect, but I think that's, you know two-way street."

FINDINGS

Factors for Treatment Success

Participants of the focus group were asked about what factors are important when considering the success of treatment.

Length of Treatment

Individuals expressed the differences in the length of treatment and how more time may be better. One individual also expressed not being hired until a certain length of time passed during recovery

- "I did a 90 day treatment and I think that these 26 day treatments are not long enough, to be honest, and you know, not authorized for payment for longer than that. But I know even though they say, meet medical necessity and stuff like that, but you got to dry out like you got to be learning things."
- "I was in there for 14 days and half of the people that they're trying to treat, hundreds of people at the same time thinking that we're all the same just because we were addicts, but really we all use for different reasons."
- "I feel like, hey, I stayed longer than that 14 days, then. Yeah, maybe I would have, you know, got into it a little bit more, but I knew I was counting down the days. Right when I got there. 12 more days. Five more days. Let's go. So, yeah, definitely longer stents of of treatment. And like I said, maybe not just focusing on addiction, but also the mental health."

FINDINGS

Factors for Treatment Success

- "...a lot of places, there is a 2 year like minimum of being clean, like otherwise they won't hire you."

Health Insurance Determination

Individuals shared their struggles with insurance and how their quality of care differed by insurance.

- "It shouldn't be all because you have Medicaid should not be bottom of the barrel treatment, right? You know, it should be. There should be a standard of care."
- "... someone should get to say you know what I don't really want to go to (treatment center), I'd rather go here, right? Because of the success rate that's here ... you're going to throw me in here with a bunch of guys, and it's a real, like, one star place. But there's this three star place over here and I know it's determined on on on your medical insurance and stuff like that, but it shouldn't be."
- "...we're getting kicked out of the Suboxone program because of Medicaid and different stuff. I know people that go all the way down to Muskegon every morning to do the methadone treatment."

Quality of Care

Participants shared issues with the quality of care they received during treatment and how they lacked resources that could have been beneficial.

FINDINGS

Factors for Treatment Success

- "A lot of people probably wouldn't be a reason to stay too you know if it wasn't so awful and you weren't eating jail food that's what you're eating. And if you've ever been to treatment and sometimes it's not the best food."
- "we've never had those resources because our (treatment centers). They are not allowed to have some of those resources. They don't have the funding for it or they don't have the licensing for it"

Lack of Counselors in Community

Individuals talked about the lack of counselors for those in recovery in the area, and that there is only one main individual for the community.

- "She's the only good one."
- "There's a lot of social workers out there right. They don't want to deal with addiction. No, it takes a very special person to deal with an addiction."
- "The tribe was supposed to hire a peer recovery coach and then they never hired him"
- "She does a really good job. However, she's cut off by the Tribal Council. The Tribal Council has no drive to help addicts or they don't. They're the same way. They don't want to admit that they have any of these problems."

FINDINGS

Factors for Treatment Success

Maintenance and Therapy

Participants discussed different ways they try to stay successful in their recovery after treatment including maintenance, therapy, and beneficial programs.

- "For a long time it was just stay late working."
- "being on a maintenance program like here, SHS, like my medication and everything"
- "I mean the MAT program being in prison for a heroin addict is a big thing."
- "Therapy... Having someone you can talk to is very important."
- "Just consistency. The consistency and routine of, you know."
- "My therapy and my medication are #1 like individual therapies"

Additional Resources Needed

Participants shared their thoughts on necessary changes in the community to strengthen the recovery community.

- "...more resources here. Like as far as like I wish there was more. Like an inpatient."
- "...when you're out in the streets, you're living in the woods and you're on drugs. If it's not boom in your face, you don't know it's there"

FINDINGS

Factors for Treatment Success

- "I mean, there's not anything really aimed at middle-aged people who want to go do something fun, whereas there's not substances involved... in order to do those things you have to have a recovery community"
- "But how do we build those numbers? How do we get people involved? How do we show people that there's fun and recovery, whether it's 12 steps you know, and it's like having people to offer multiple pathway meetings."
- "Like I want to have a group that. Like I can go to the farmers market on Friday morning and then we can go for a walk and like starting things like that..."
- "Why are we not funneling more into prevention so that these kids are getting what they need? So before they have to get treatment 3,4,5,6 times, all the money's going to that. Why are we not getting these committees into school?"

OVERALL THEMES

Needs for Supporting Those in Recovery

- **Increased need for mental health treatment**
 - Many individuals have underlying reasons behind their substance use, so having treatment that involves mental health therapy or counseling can strengthen their recovery.
- **Decreased stigma from community and medical professionals**
 - Individuals face stigma from community members, medical professionals, and employers that prevent them from progressing in their recovery.
- **Decreased barriers to care**
 - Cost, transportation, lack of recovery options and insurance all play a role in having access to treatment. Breaking these barriers to provide more individuals the ability to receive care.
- **Increased recovery or sober activities**
 - Create communities for individuals in recovery to strengthen bonds and give healthy outlets to socialize with one another.
- **Increased Youth Education**
 - Provide education to children to try to prevent the early onset of substance use.
- **Increase Medication Education**
 - Providing education on prescribed medications and making patients aware of potential addiction.

OVERALL THEMES

Recommendations

- **Sober Activities**
 - Providing adult recreational sport leagues, a walking group, or a sober club specifically for those in recovery.
- **Treatment with Mental Health Services**
 - Connect treatment centers to mental health services in order to strengthen the recovery process.
- **Increased Amount of Treatment Centers**
 - Adding more treatment centers in these areas to help bring awareness to the community and create increased access to care.
- **Providing Education in Schools**
 - Using schools to educate the youth allows for widespread education on substance use effects.
- **Providing Education on Medications**
 - Increase patient education techniques at medical visits and pharmacies, especially for potentially addictive substances.