

# Living Free: Substance Use

ARHP initiatives related to substance use prevention, treatment, and recovery

## THE FACTS

### POOR MENTAL HEALTH

On average, **individuals** in the 23-county service area **experience 5.3 poor mental health days per month**, while **18% note frequent mental distress**.<sup>1</sup>

### ILLICIT DRUG & ALCOHOL USE

Nearly **10% of individuals age twelve and above** had diagnosed **drug use disorders** in the past year (8.65-9.31%), while 6.25-6.68% of **individuals needed but did not receive treatment** at a specialty facility for illicit drug use.<sup>2</sup>

### DRUG OVERDOSE

**Overdose deaths** across the state of Arkansas **have drastically climbed between 2014-2022**, with the greatest increase in deaths due to fentanyl and methamphetamine.<sup>3</sup>

### INJECTION-RELATED COMPLICATIONS

**Individuals injecting illicit drugs** experience **increased risk** of **invasive bacterial and fungal infections**, as well as HIV and Hepatitis C.<sup>4</sup>



## How do we face the current drug epidemic?

In 2017, the Arkansas Rural Health Partnership (ARHP) and its members were alarmed by quickly rising rates of illicit drug use and corresponding overdose rates, particularly related to methamphetamines, opioids, and fentanyl. Later that same year, the non-profit launched a multi-faceted and comprehensive response by actively engaging local, regional, and state partners in efforts to support every stage of substance use (including prevention, treatment, and recovery). Over five years later, this meaningful work spans much of south Arkansas and provides a proven model that can be replicated in similar rural communities currently being torn apart by the drug epidemic.

**Behavioral Health Task Force.** Launched in early 2018, the regional task force provided the first platform for coordinated efforts between mental health and substance use providers and policy makers across South Arkansas. Today, the group includes 46 members (spanning representatives from hospitals, health centers, law enforcement, circuit courts, and more) and meets quarterly to continue to address behavioral health infrastructure needs in the 23-county South Arkansas region.

**Peer Recovery Support Specialists.** Often, the person with the most compassion and understanding is the one who has walked a mile in someone else's shoes. In early 2021, ARHP began providing one-on-one support

# REDUCING SUBSTANCE USE & RELATED IMPACTS IN RURAL ARKANSAS

to individuals with substance use disorder through evidence-based peer recovery support specialists. Today, ARHP has 5 peer recovery support specialists on staff and has supported over 1,800 individuals at-risk of or diagnosed with substance use disorder. Specialists also work closely with local courts and jail systems to provide treatment options for individuals struggling with substance use disorder while reducing the strain on the judicial system.

**Community Awareness Videos.** In 2017, there was a significant lack of local understanding and knowledge among residents and providers alike related to the drug epidemic and treatment options. In 2018, ARHP produced the first of three drug-related videos to engage and inform community members. The 18-minute ARHP opioid awareness video has been viewed over 8,000 times and is regularly shown at local outreach events, community presentations, nursing & medical schools across the state, and at national conferences. In 2023, ARHP produced two more videos (15-minutes each) related to Drugs of Abuse and Peer Recovery Support Specialists.

**Community Outreach & Education.** ARHP provides a range of accessible, easy-to-understand, one-on-one and small group education to inform community members from all backgrounds on how to prevent, treat, and support individuals with substance use disorders. Community member education includes 1) Narcan training, 2) Don't Run, Call 911, 3) Narcansas App, 4) Drug Take Back Program, and 5) ARHP Resource Directory. In 2023 alone, over 2,000 individuals in the region have benefitted from targeted efforts.

**Student Outreach & Education.** ARHP partners with middle and high schools throughout the 12-county southeast Arkansas region to provide Be in the Know training. This two-

hour class is provided to students and faculty at no cost and provides information about the harms and consequences of illicit drug use, including impacts on the body and mind, overdose risk, legal consequences, and more. To date, over 330 students and teachers have completed this training.



**Law Enforcement Officer Training.** Beginning July 2023, ARHP peer support specialists provide law enforcement officers throughout the 12-county southeast Arkansas region with information about the role of peer support specialists and they can assist efforts when engaging individuals with substance use concerns.



**Pilot Drug Court.** In January 2021, ARHP launched a pilot in partnership with the DeWitt District Court. The program identifies individuals with substance use/opioid use disorder and connects them to the peer support recovery specialist and a licensed clinical social worker. Together, the individual is supported through recovery in lieu of jail time. To date, nearly 3,000 individuals have been provided targeted peer support and therapy services.

**ARHP Drug Summit.** In June 2023, ARHP hosted a drug summit in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. Over 75 individuals from across Arkansas representing healthcare organizations, health & social service agencies, law enforce-

ment, the judicial system, and community organizations attended the all-day meeting. The meeting was held in collaboration with the ARHP Behavioral Health Task Force.

**Infectious Diseases Referrals.** Individuals injecting drugs experience an increased risk of contracting infectious diseases (including HIV and Hepatitis C). ARHP partners with local federally qualified health centers to link individuals to infectious diseases prevention and treatment services, regardless of the ability to pay.