



# 2022 COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## Aroostook Rural Communities Opioid Response Program Aroostook County, Maine



In September 2020, Aroostook Mental Health Services, Inc. was awarded a \$200,000, 18-month planning grant from the Human Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) Rural Communities Opioid Response Program (RCORP). As a result, a consortium, known as Aroostook Rural Communities Opioid Response Program (ACORP), was formed to reduce the morbidity and mortality of substance use disorder (SUD), including opioid use disorder (OUD.) In addition to Aroostook Mental Health Services, Inc., the consortium includes the Aroostook County Sheriff's Office, Cary Medical Center, Northern Light AR Gould Hospital, Houlton Regional Hospital, Northern Maine Medical Center, Micmac Behavioral Health, and a person in recovery.

Despite the addition of more substance use services in Aroostook County, overdose rates continue to rise at alarming rates. Fentanyl in the drug supply is a significant contributor to the epidemic. As a result, testing strips have been widely distributed through peer recovery centers, healthcare providers, and law enforcement. Tragically, in Aroostook County, overdose deaths claimed the lives of 14 individuals in 2019, 17 in 2020, and 32 in 2021 (January 1, 2021–November 30, 2021).

Throughout the planning grant, the consortium has engaged stakeholders representing many community sectors such as healthcare, law enforcement, tribal, social service, business, municipal, education. In particular, individuals with SUD/OUD in treatment and recovery, individuals who actively use substances, and others affected.

The community needs assessment survey was developed to provide an outlet for community members to reflect their views on SUD/OUD. The survey was released in December 2020, and re-released in December 2021, to compare changes, if any, regarding perceptions in service gaps or community awareness about SUD/OUD. The survey included a total of 21 questions. There was strong community participation, with 483 respondents in 2020 and 415 responses in 2021. The outcome provided a comparable data set and suggests that Aroostook County residents are motivated to address substance use disorder and the opioid epidemic. Highlights are noted on the following page.

## Prevention

Measurements based on total number of respondents	Percent of Respondents	
	2020	2021
Believe there is a need for improved adolescent prevention programs	91%	91%
Would like to see the expansion of naloxone distribution through jails, treatment centers, emergency rooms, first responders, etc.	78%	75%
Felt that expansion of Syringe Service Programs (SSPs) is needed	75%	75%
Unfamiliar with the Good Samaritan Law (GSL)	41%	30%
Favor of accessible HCV/HIV testing	81%	75%
Know naloxone distribution service is already available	8%	14%
Do not know what naloxone service is	9%	3%

## Treatment

Measurements based on total number of respondents	Percent of Respondents	
	2020	2021
Believe transportation is a barrier to treatment	72%	69%
Persons in recovery (PIR) believe telehealth is a reliable alternative to in-person	41%	61%
Believe residents in smaller, more rural towns lack access to services than those who live closer to hub towns (Presque Isle, Caribou, Houlton)	62%	58%
Support MAT as a viable treatment option for SUD/ODD	71%	80%

## Recovery

Measurements based on total number of respondents	Percent of Respondents	
	2020	2021
Agree in expanding peer recovery services including recovery coaching	63%	67%
Agree in expanding safe housing options, such as recovery residences	89%	89%

## Stigma

Measurements based on total number of respondents	Percent of Respondents	
	2020	2021
Agree stigma is an issue in their community.	85%	81%
Agree in expanding stigma training for all populations	91%	92%

# KEY FINDINGS

## Prevention

The following needs are consistent in 2020 and 2021:

- More engagement with youth
- Improving and increasing screening measures for youth at risk of SUD
- Expansion of HCV/HIV services
- Expansion of harm reduction services

Progress is noted in the following areas: there was an improvement from 2020 to 2021 in the number of community members who understand what naloxone is and that it is readily available in the community. In addition, familiarity with the Good Samaritan Law (GSL) increased by 11%.

## Treatment

Several findings were similar in 2020 and 2021, including transportation challenges, lack of access in smaller towns, and the need to expand medication-assisted treatment (MAT). Due to COVID-19, telehealth options grew quickly in 2020. However, people in recovery (PIR) were reluctant to see telehealth as a reliable alternative to in-person treatment. In 2021, PIR responded more favorably, seeing a 20% increase of PIR who responded positively to its use. The number of individuals who support medication-assisted treatment (MAT) as a viable treatment option increased from 71% to 80%. Efforts to expand MAT are ongoing and include Aroostook's first Methadone clinic in 2021.

## Recovery

The expansion of recovery coaching services and supportive housing options, like recovery residences, remains high among survey participants. Progress in recovery services includes the opening of Aroostook's first women's recovery residence in early 2022, increasing the number of residencies to two. In addition, recovery coach certification is underway in Maine, and grant funding has been provided to place recovery coaches and/or peer support specialists in emergency rooms, shelters, and Aroostook County Jail.

## Stigma

Stigma remains a significant challenge in our county. Several trainings focused on equity of care were held in 2021, and it was encouraging to see stakeholders from various backgrounds participate in these educational forums. While 4% fewer individuals believe stigma is an issue in their community compared to last year (2020), 92% of respondents recognize that more education is needed.

## Summary

Aroostook County continues to grow and expand substance use services across the region. It is also encouraging to see momentum across community sectors to address the epidemic, including the United Way of Aroostook's Substance Use Symposium on April 1, 2022, and a desire by local businesses to learn more about what it means to be a Recovery Friendly Employer. As ACORP and other community stakeholders continue to advance services and provide education, there is evidence of success from those seeking help. When asked on the community survey what is new about this year (2021) compared to last (2020), one respondent said, "I believe that people realize how serious addiction can be and that it does not discriminate between age, race, sex, and ethnicity. Anyone can become addicted. I am currently in recovery myself, and just in this past year alone, I have been able to see all sides of addiction. I wish it were much easier to get help than it actually is, especially being addicted and trying to keep a job and a family and your sanity. It's really hard. I believe the MAT program has saved my life and continues to save my life today."

*This project is supported by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award totaling \$200,000 with 100% percentage funded by HRSA/HHS. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by HRSA/HHS or the U.S. Government.*