

SUPPORTING DECISION MAKERS USING OPIOID SETTLEMENT FUNDS

*Centering and Engaging People With Lived and
Living Experience*



SEPTEMBER 2024



To provide common sense solutions!

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This resource was prepared in coordination with Prevention Institute through a project supported by Cooperative Agreement Number NU380T000305 from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

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SUGGESTED CITATION:

Supporting Decision Makers Using Opioid Settlement Funds: Centering and Engaging People With Lived and Living Experience. SheRay's & Associates, LLC, September 2024.

PHOTO CREDITS:

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RISE UP WV. PHOTO BY CHAD CORDELL OF FIGHTINGFOX PHOTOGRAPHY.

BACKGROUND

Overview and Purpose

As a result of lawsuits against pharmaceutical opioid manufacturers, distributors, and retailers, an expected \$50 billion will be awarded to state, local, and tribal communities across the United States to address the opioid epidemic. These opioid settlement funds (OSF) represent a unique opportunity to invest in public health interventions to address opioid misuse, overdose, and other harms, and thus, **it is crucial that local decision making on how these funds are spent be community-informed and center the perspectives of people with lived and living experience (PWLLE)**. The United States Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) defines lived experience as the “representation and understanding of an individual’s human experiences, choices, and options and how those factors influence one’s perception of knowledge.” PWLLE are those directly affected by the negative consequences of the opioid epidemic and the strategies that aim to address it, and could include people who have used or currently use opioids and other substances and their affected friends and family members.

Due to societal stigma, fear of criminal punishment, and/or other civic barriers, PWLLE have often been excluded from or hesitant to participate in discussions around the opioid epidemic response. This often results in knowledge gaps among local policymakers and a lack of tailored opioid and other substance use response strategies that center people most impacted by the opioid epidemic. With this understanding, it is critical that local decision makers charged with coordinating and allocating settlement funding (e.g., elected officials, settlement councils or other advisory bodies, public health agency leaders) seek to increase the involvement of PWLLE in OSF planning and decision making and determine how they will prioritize equity strategies in their plans. **The unique insights of PWLLE could help local decision makers improve their overall opioid response systems, research, policies, practices, and programs, and promote the sustainability of their efforts.**

To better understand how PWLLE are being engaged in opioid settlement discussions and decision making, SheRay’s & Associates, LLC conducted a series of conversations with a wide range of stakeholders, including but not limited to those currently involved in OSF work. Informal conversations were held with stakeholders with the explicit purpose of learning more about local OSF processes, including engagement with PWLLE and coordination and collaboration across multiple partners. Considering the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)’s social-ecological model for violence prevention, gathering diverse perspectives in this way is critical to gaining insight into the individual, relationship, community, and societal factors that could influence the outcomes of public health interventions funded through OSF.

Engaging with a broad population and gathering feedback from diverse audiences is a key consideration for equity in program planning. As highlighted by ASPE, “it is important for health and human services programs to value the perspectives of people they aim to support or who could benefit from the programs and services by learning from and acting on their perspectives, histories, priorities, and aspirations” (“[What is Lived Experience?](#)”).

This resource is intended to support local OSF decision makers and stakeholders charged with allocating and coordinating settlement funding, including elected officials, treatment and recovery practitioners, community advocates and coalitions, settlement councils or other advisory bodies, and public health professionals, who are considering how to strengthen their community engagement efforts in opioid response. This resource will explore community engagement principles and themes surfaced by select OSF stakeholders, which could serve as a basis for further research, conversation, and planning.

Understanding the Landscape

From October 2023 to February 2024, SheRay's & Associates, LLC engaged in seventeen conversations nationwide with PWLLE and organizations that represent and/or directly serve them to gain insights on their perceptions of OSF and factors that could influence their decision making. More specifically, project questions focused on:

- Knowledge of OSF;
- Participation in OSF planning;
- Knowledge of amounts distributed to their local community and how to access funding;
- Understanding of what OSF will be used for locally;
- Knowledge of any existing evaluation plans for OSF spending; and
- How PWLLE are included in and a part of the OSF decision making process.

Participants were also asked about their ideal vision for OSF spending, including what they think OSF should focus on and be used to accomplish. SheRay's & Associates, LLC leveraged existing multi-sector relationships, including with prevention and harm reduction networks across the country, and snowball sampling to engage the following subject matter experts:

- Community-based leadership and staff;
- Partners and collaborators within the field of substance use prevention, including members of the National Prevention Network and Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) grantees;
- State and county human services leaders;
- Family members of individuals with opioid and other substance use disorders; and
- Individuals currently engaging in active substance use.



EQUITY FELLOWSHIP. PHOTO BY IRONYPOISONING VIA CREATIVE COMMONS

LESSONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Opioioid Settlement Fund Knowledge Gaps

Conversations with participants and organizational partners suggested much more needs to be done to inform the public of the availability and uses of OSF. Participants raised important questions about the OSF process and the opioioid epidemic, including the following:

- Why were there lawsuits that resulted in OSF in the first place?
- What and who decided what were allowable strategies for using OSF?
- How will OSF be allocated at the local and county level? Is there a formal application process to receive funds for programming at the local level?
- Who will make decisions around and guide the implementation of OSF?
- What OSF spending model(s) or examples can best support community needs?
- When will state and local OSF action plans be put into motion?
- Where can I locate information about my local OSF plan?

These inquiries point to knowledge gaps that local decision makers should aim to fill through public and transparent communications around their OSF processes; opportunities to hear from and engage PWLLE in decision making; and the need for ongoing monitoring and evaluation to understand the impact of strategies being implemented using opioioid settlement funds.

Engaging People With Lived and Living Experience

The expert conversations also yielded several themes around engagement of PWLLE in OSF work, including the need for OSF spending and action plans to focus on *inclusion*, *effective planning*, *transparency*, and *training and facilitation*. Local settlement fund decision makers should carefully consider these themes as they design their spending plans and determine how to achieve the most impactful community outcomes.



Identifying Stakeholders

- ▶ **Broad Representation:** Identify and engage a diverse range of stakeholders or groups of interest in OSF decision making, including PWLLE, healthcare providers, justice-involved people, community-based organizations, law enforcement and criminal justice agencies, first responders, direct service providers, educators, child welfare workers, local government officials, and/or faith-based organizations.
- ▶ **Equity Focus:** Identify and include marginalized and underrepresented groups in the OSF decision making process, especially as people of color continue to be disproportionately impacted by overdose deaths.
- ▶ **Fight Stigma!** Do not demonize, encourage equality, and gain insight and clear perspective. Incorporate SheRay's & Associates, LLC's "B.A.M.M." framework (**B**reak the Stigma, **A**sk for Help, **M**ake the Call, **M**ake the Change™), which includes:
 - Identifying the concerns of the community in regards to opioid and other substance use. Information provided directly by community members can help local decision makers determine priorities for investment of settlement funding and tailor strategies to respond to the local context, needs, and assets. Initiating these community conversations can also aid in preventing stigma against people with lived and living experience, who are critical to engage and empower through these conversations as well.
 - Organizing culturally appropriate town halls with clearly identified target audience(s) and facilitated by local opioid use professionals. Community members can leverage these town halls to document stigmas, barriers, and community solutions and co-create a community stigma reduction plan.
 - Implementing social media awareness campaigns targeting youth and adults. Campaigns should be designed to raise awareness, decrease the prevalence of opioid use disorder, and to provide information on help resources available.
 - Identifying appropriate evidence-based opioid remediation programs, practices, or policies for the community.

Engaging Communities

- ▶ **Community Meetings:** Meet regularly at accessible times and locations (e.g., community centers, libraries, public schools, etc.) to gather community input and feedback around what local opioid response strategies should look like.
- ▶ **Advisory Boards:** Create active community advisory boards that inform OSF decision making and include representatives from all key stakeholder groups, especially those with lived and living experience. As state and local jurisdictions implement opioid abatement or other advisory councils, they should institute guidance to ensure that people closest to the problem and most impacted are

represented and have a strong voice in decision making. These groups should also be empowered to hold local decision makers accountable and involved in understanding how funds are contributing to better community outcomes.

- ▶ **Surveys and Focus Groups:** Incorporate community surveys and conduct focus groups to gather broad input and data to better understand the true needs and priorities of different community groups. The resulting data should inform OSF spending decisions.

Removing Barriers to Participation and Engagement

- ▶ **Accessibility:** Ensure community meetings, information, and shared materials are accessible to all, including providing language translation and interpreters, developing written materials at or below a third grade reading level, using infographics that make it easier to interpret and follow data, and providing accommodations for seen and unseen disabilities.
- ▶ **Compensation:** Compensate community members, particularly those with lived and living experience, for their time, efforts, and contributions.

EFFECTIVE PLANNING



Conducting Needs Assessments

- ▶ **Data Collection:** Collect and analyze data on opioid use, overdose rates, treatment availability, medical examiner data, and other relevant factors such as the social determinants of health (e.g., housing, employment, social connection). Disaggregate data by specific populations (e.g., racial/ethnic, gender, socioeconomic status) to identify inequities and geographic areas most impacted. The resulting data should inform OSF spending decisions and be used to support interventions that support those most impacted by opioid use and overdose deaths.
- ▶ **Community Input:** Incorporate input from community members to identify service and investment gaps and prioritize needs.
- ▶ **Multiple Forms of Evidence:** Leverage the wealth of best available research evidence (e.g., quantitative data, scientific literature) *and* contextual (measurable community factors collected from local data sources) and experiential evidence (lived and living experience). This synthesis moves solutions away from a one-size-fits-all approach and towards tailored community change.

Developing Strategic Plans

- ▶ **Set Clear Goals:** Define clear, measurable goals for using the funds (e.g., SMART goals—**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**elevant, **T**ime-bound), including timelines for when progress will be assessed.
- ▶ **Develop Action Plans:** Create detailed action plans for OSF spending outlining specific initiatives, timelines, and responsible parties.

- ▶ **Allocate Resources:** Ensure that OSF resources are allocated based on needs and priorities identified through community engagement.
- ▶ **Measurement and Evaluation:** Define specific measures of success for OSF spending and routines for collecting and analyzing data that can be used to assess progress. Impact data should include the multiple forms of evidence described above. For additional guidance on measurement and evaluation (M&E) as it relates to opioid settlement spending, please refer to [this resource guide](#) prepared by RTI International.

Collaborating and Coordinating

- ▶ **Partnerships:** Establish partnerships with local and state organizations, healthcare providers, local advocacy groups, first responders, and other stakeholders and groups of interest to enhance the reach and impact of OSF-funded initiatives. Transformative change will require a multi-sector approach that brings together traditional and non-traditional stakeholders (e.g., housing and social service agencies, local businesses) to design community-centered solutions.
- ▶ **Integrated Approaches:** Promote integrated approaches that address prevention, treatment, recovery, and harm reduction comprehensively and simultaneously. A multi-pronged approach that emphasizes the urgency of the epidemic and reverses trends in overdose deaths should be complemented by strategies and interventions that prevent the onset of use in the first place.

TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY



Openly Communicating

- ▶ **Monthly Updates:** Provide regular updates to municipalities, communities, and counties on the process and awardees of OSF. Make sure PWLLE, diverse partner groups, and community-based organizations are informed and engaged throughout ongoing OSF processes.
- ▶ **Public Reporting:** Maintain public records of OSF allocation, expenditures, and outcomes.

Involving Stakeholders

- ▶ **Inclusive Decision Making:** Ensure that decisions about OSF use are made transparently, with input from a broad range of community stakeholders, including PWLLE.
- ▶ **Feedback Mechanisms:** Implement mechanisms for ongoing feedback from the community and stakeholders and groups of interest (e.g., town halls, surveys).

Fostering Accountability

- ▶ **Review Action Plans:** Assign and implement continuous reviews to ensure OSF have been utilized properly and lawfully.

- ▶ **Independent Oversight:** Establish an independent oversight committee to monitor fund use and outcomes. PWLLE and other community stakeholders should be represented.
- ▶ **Performance and Continuous Quality Improvement:** Be deliberate and focused on action plan strategies that are responsive to the identified community needs.

TRAINING AND FACILITATION



Building Capacity

- ▶ **Training Programs:** Provide training programs on best practices in prevention, treatment, recovery, and harm reduction for community members, healthcare providers, first responders, and other stakeholders.
- ▶ **Skill Development:** Offer skill development workshops to enhance the capacity of community organizations and individuals involved in OSF fund management. Provide opportunities for peer learning and exchange that center evidence-based practices and approaches to opioid use prevention.

Fostering Facilitation Skills

- ▶ **Facilitator Training:** Train facilitators of OSF decision making conversations in effective meeting management, conflict resolution, and inclusive practices.
- ▶ **Peer Facilitation:** Encourage and train PWLLE to act as peer facilitators in OSF community meetings, projects, and initiatives.

Developing Supportive Infrastructure

- ▶ **Resource Materials:** Develop and distribute materials to support training and facilitation efforts.
- ▶ **Technical Assistance:** Provide ongoing technical assistance to community organizations and other stakeholders to ensure effective implementation of OSF-funded projects. The goal is to guide applicants to the right resources and explain the process to them so that they can easily navigate and understand how to get involved.

CONCLUSION

Opioid settlement funds have the potential to bring about significant community change and offer hope for a future free from the grip of the opioid epidemic. Given the far-reaching implications of the opioid epidemic across communities and sectors, it is crucial to include and engage diverse viewpoints, perspectives, and groups in opioid settlement fund decision making. **In particular, input from PWLLE is integral to promoting health equity across opioid remediation strategies and should serve as a primary driver of local decision making.** Partnerships between PWLLE, the organizations and government agencies that serve

them, and other community stakeholders impacted by the opioid epidemic should also seek to collaboratively understand, apply, and implement evidence-based interventions and strategies funded using opioid settlement dollars. SheRay's & Associates, LLC encourages decision makers charged with coordinating and allocating settlement funding to apply the learnings and recommendations from its research as they tailor engagement and partnership strategies to their local context.

Additional Resources

For state-specific guides analyzing total settlement amounts and allocation, decision making processes, and additional resources, please visit the [Opioid Settlement Tracker](#).

For additional resources and guidance on establishing policies and programming using opioid settlement funds, please visit [Prevention Institute's online resource hub](#).

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Acknowledgments

This resource was developed by SheRay's & Associates, LLC, in partnership with Prevention Institute. It was overseen by Raylette Pickett, Chief Operating Officer, and Tracy Johnson, Managing Partner, and written by Costella Green, Federal Relations & Quality Assurance Specialist, and Lauren Gottlieb. External review was provided by Dana Fields-Johnson, Amanda Gao, and Juan González of Prevention Institute. The authors would like to express gratitude to the subject matter experts who provided insight on OSF and factors that could influence their decision making.



SheRay's & Associates, LLC
12100 Ford Road, Suite 372
Farmers Branch, Texas 75234
SheRays.com