



Prevention Collaboration in Action

Grantee
Success Stories

Partnering with Purpose in the Carolinas

For the past decade, the Carolinas have confronted a significant rise in opioid misuse.¹ The need for prevention and treatment services is especially acute for LGBTQ+ residents who are nearly twice as likely to misuse opioids than non-LGBTQ+ people.^{2,3}

The Opioid Prevention and Treatment Task Force, known as OPT Out, is one regional initiative that is making a difference. By helping direct service providers make their programs and systems more inclusive, OPT Out increases access to services that support LGBTQ+ youth and young adults aged 14 to 25, as well as people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) who are at increased risk for substance use disorders (SUD). OPT Out is funded by a SAMHSA Partnerships for Success grant that was awarded to [Carolinas CARE Partnership \(CCP\)](#), a non-profit that serves the LGBTQ+ community, in 2020.

Collaborating with organizations who serve LGBTQ+ youth and young adults and PLWHA—including many that do not specifically focus on substance misuse—has enabled OPT Out to reach a wide audience, which expands their impact. As of spring 2023, OPT Out had partnership agreements with more than 25 organizations across the Carolinas, including schools, hospitals, law enforcement, and providers serving the LGBTQ+ community. They also have more than 100 volunteer Task Force members that support ongoing initiatives and workgroups.



CCP staff and partners at a local Walmart event celebrating the launch of Walmart's new initiative to increase access to HIV medications/services.

“Partnerships are the cornerstone of our success,” says Leslie Dill, OPT Out program manager. “I don’t believe you can do prevention in a silo.”

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

Start with Data

Much of OPT Out's impact comes through its workgroups, which focus the efforts of OPT Out's task force members into specific areas of need. To identify workgroup priorities, Dill used a tried-and-true method of prevention planning: she started with a needs assessment of community partners.

“We asked, ‘What’s working well in your organization to support queer people and people living with HIV?’” she says, “We also asked what could be better. That’s how the workgroups were established.”

One identified need was to help substance misuse prevention and treatment organizations design more inclusive intake and survey forms, in order to be more welcoming to all people. Another was to increase the quality and quantity of data about substance misuse among the populations that OPT Out is trying to serve. Workgroups were established to address both of those issues.

When meeting with current and potential partners, Dill also stays data focused. She believes that making a data-based case for prevention can help cut through peoples' different opinions on substance misuse. “The things I say are always data-driven,” she says. “It’s never my opinion. It’s always based on data.”

Find a Champion

Dill has been able to extend the reach of OPT Out by enlisting champions within organizations where she previously lacked a foothold.

For example, a personal connection put her in touch with a high-ranking administrator in a local school district who shared her interest in creating safer spaces for transgender youth. While the administrator's school had done some work



Leslie Dill presenting a Platinum Partner Award to Jorge Bedoya, Senior Master Sergeant of the Air National Guard and member of OPT Outs's Task Force.

around inclusion—such as facilitating name and gender changes for transgender students in the school directory—the overall district had not yet followed suit.

“Once I learned about him, I thought, ‘He’s the liaison—he is how we start partnering with the district,’” says Dill.

Dill told the administrator about OPT Out’s Brave Space campaign, an educational program that aims to help professionals and organizations that serve LGBTQ+ youth be more welcoming and inclusive. In March 2023, the administrator started partnering with OPT Out to plan a Brave Space pilot. Later that year, OPT Out began rolling out Brave Space programming across the entire district.

Identify an Area of Mutual Concern

Dill knows that in order to improve SUD services for LGBTQ+ youth and young adults and PLWHA, she has to reach out to a wide range of service providers—including schools, churches, health systems, local non-profits, and treatment providers. Not all of these organizations have a specific champion that can be tapped; some don’t even have a mission that is in line with that of OPT Out.

In these instances, she looks for an area of mutual interest or concern that can serve as the starting point for a conversation.

When talking to a program that serves PLWHA but has no background in substance misuse prevention, for example, Dill may share some information about why this population is at elevated risk for misuse, and why partnering with OPT Out can help the program better serve their audience. Or, when talking to a faith-based organization that might be hesitant to engage in conversations about LGBTQ+ youth, she may focus on the community harm that is done when all people do not get the prevention and treatment services they need.

“If I can get to them by framing the issue within their context and just not focusing on the parts that they have a really hard time with, then that’s what I do,” she says.

Don't Compete—Collaborate

Dill admits that collaboration isn't always easy. When CCP first received funding for OPT Out, she reached out to a substance misuse task force in a neighboring county. Would they consider partnering on prevention programming?

They declined, saying that OPT Out would just duplicate existing efforts to deliver prevention in their county. Undeterred, Dill shared the ways OPT Out was unique—and how a partnership could improve health outcomes for more people. As a sign of her commitment to the issues, she also offered to serve on the neighboring county's task force.

They gradually came to see that Dill wanted to be a collaborator on improving access to substance misuse, not a competitor for substance misuse funding. A working relationship followed. Today, the two task forces have a constructive relationship and regularly partner.

Embrace a Range of Partnership Models

Dill is eager for partners who want to commit any amount of time or energy to the work. She recognizes that while some people may have multiple hours every week, others may only be able to participate on an occasional basis. That's fine with her.

She recalls talking to a colleague from a neighboring county who was planning on stepping away from substance misuse prevention work. He told Dill that even though he was leaving his position, he still wanted to contribute to what she was doing in the region. How could he help?

"I told him, 'If I have a specific ask and I call you, just tell me that you'll answer my call and help guide me in the right direction,'" she recalls.

Likewise, she acknowledges that some potential advocates can't publicly support OPT Out because of their professional affiliations. Dill makes room for them on the task forces, too.

"Just because a person cannot attend your scheduled task force meeting does not mean that they are not a supporter of your task force," she says.



Leslie Dill with Omega Phi Beta partners at their PRISM (People's Recovery Initiative for Solutions & More) event in September 2022.

Prepare for Sustainability

With staff turnover so high in the non-profit and social services sectors, membership on the OPT Out Task Forces is constantly changing. To ensure some level of consistency, Dill asks all new task force members who she should contact in the event they ever leave their current role at their organization. That helps her continue organizational partnerships even if her personal connections move into other positions.

“I've used that information several times in terms of sustaining relationships,” she says.

She has also had to think about her own sustainability and workload. Burnout is real, she says, especially when you are constantly having to push for programs and services that not everybody in the community agrees with.



Ashley Osborne and Leslie Dill at OPT Out's 2023 event, "Always Here: A Catawba Perspective on Being Queer, Being Well, and Being Here."

Recently, Dill hit a wall. She had just done an in-person presentation for 50 social workers and wasn't sure if she could do any more presentations for a while. She was exhausted.

But her program manager, Ashley Osborne, stepped up. Osborne had been watching Dill present for months and knew the content well. Plus, she could add her own spin.

“I said, ‘Yes, please,’” recalls Dill. “I always want to be the conductor of everything. But once you get to that point where you're exhausted and burnt out, you have to trust your colleagues to take over. Because if you don't take care of yourself, you won't be able to continue doing this important work.”

REFERENCES

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- ² Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2023). *2021 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Among the Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual (LGB) Population Aged 18 or Older*. <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/reports/rpt41854/NSDUH%20highlighted%20population%20slides/For%20NSDUH%20highlighted%20population%20slides/2021NSDUHPopulationSlidesLGB050323.pdf>
- ³ National Institute on Drug Abuse. (Undated). *Substance Use and SUDs in LGBTQ* Populations*. <https://nida.nih.gov/research-topics/substance-use-suds-in-lgbtq-populations>