



National Judicial Opioid Task Force

Creating a Local or Regional Judicial Opioid Task Force

As the impact of the opioid crisis reverberates through American communities, one aspect is startlingly clear: the crisis is a complex social problem that cannot be adequately addressed by one sector of the community. A coordinated approach that engages partners from justice, treatment, healthcare and community systems is essential. State and local courts have an important role in a comprehensive response to the epidemic. And the judiciary is uniquely positioned in communities to convene key stakeholders who, when together at the table, can facilitate the targeted and sustainable collaborations needed for change.

A Comprehensive Approach

The National Judicial Opioid Task Force¹ recommends that all state courts participate in a comprehensive approach to the opioid crisis by maximizing the role of the judge as convener. The Conference of Chief Justices demonstrated this approach at a national level with the creation of the National Judicial Opioid Task Force.²

In 2016, judicial leaders from eight Midwestern states took the lead to create the Appalachia-Midwest Regional Judicial Opioid Initiative,³ and in 2018, similar action was taken by several northeastern states to create the New England Regional Judicial Opioid Initiative. In 2016, the National Governors Association called upon states to identify or create a statewide task force as a key initial step in efforts to address the crisis.⁴ Governors in many states followed the recommendation, and in most cases, members of the judiciary were invited to participate. In a few states, the task forces were convened by the chief justice and/or supreme court rather than the Governor.⁵

These state task forces have been successful in assessing the nature and scope of the crisis within each state, establishing responsive policies, and recommending legislation.⁶ In many communities, however, a more directed response may be required, based upon the particular nature of the epidemic present in the community, the problems that are creating the most concern, and taking into account the resources available at the local level. Local judges can be instrumental in providing the leadership for the creation of these local and regional opioid task forces.

Why Start or Join a Local or Regional Task Force?

A task force or coalition is a group of individuals and/or organizations with a common interest who agree to work together toward a common goal. A coalition of community partners can conserve resources, provide a space for a range of perspectives and information sharing, foster a broader and more accurate perspective on the issue and solutions, and achieve greater impact than any single organization can attain.

Starting a Judicial Opioid Task Force

- 1. Convene a Core Planning Group.** Bring together a small group of partners who are most involved in the issue of opioid addiction in the court and community. Ask yourselves a few questions: Can the issue of opioid addiction be better addressed if all concerned parties are working together, and will a task force help to accomplish that purpose? Will a task force increase the coherence, strength, and effectiveness of the court's response to opioid addiction? If the community already has a number of task forces/coalitions, is yet another the best response to this issue or is joining with an existing coalition more appropriate? Consider both what the courts need and what the courts can provide.
- 2. Identify and Recruit Important Task Force Members.** Consider which agencies and/or individuals need to be at the table. This may include justice partners (judges,

prosecutors, defense attorneys, probation, law enforcement, clerks, the bar), behavioral health treatment providers, addiction specialists, crisis services, foster care and family services agencies, public health officials, healthcare providers (physicians, emergency department personnel, and community clinics), harm reduction services, and homeless services. In many states, community members have been invited, such as members of civic clubs, faith-based organizations, public school officials, and potential non-government funders such as foundations or philanthropists.

3. Convene the First Meeting. Discuss the issue of opioid addiction in the court and in the community. What efforts are already taking place and what are the problems or barriers? Discuss a preliminary task force structure and divide tasks such as lead communicator, note taker, future meeting logistics, etc. Gauge interest and investment. Make the most of agencies willing to contribute time and resources.

4. Develop a Strategic Plan. Consider using the Sequential Intercept Model as a tool to identify gaps/barriers and resources, organize partners, and plan for change. If possible, plan and hold a Sequential Intercept Mapping Workshop and Action Planning Meeting. Develop and clarify your vision, mission, goals, and objectives. Be sure to include the values that will set the tone for your efforts (*e.g.*, respect,

hope, many pathways to recovery, abolish stigma). Develop measures for evaluating outcomes. Consider engaging with a local university to assist in an evaluation of your efforts. Commit to a data-driven process that uses evidence-based and trauma-informed strategies.

5. Continue Recruiting Members and Designing Task Force Structure. The membership can and should change over time as additional resources are located and new partnerships are developed. Tasks and assignments can be organized and delegated through the creation of a Coordinating/Steering Committee, Subcommittees, and Workgroups.

6. Begin Executing Strategic Plan. It is quite possible that the needed response is greater than the available resources; nonetheless, work can and should begin in those areas where successful interventions and improved practices are possible. A comprehensive strategic plan can provide overall direction and context for the particular areas of focus, but your efforts should not be delayed on the basis that some tasks are outside the scope or capacity of the group's ability to respond.

7. Plan for Sustainability. Consider the needs of maintaining a task force over time and plan for sustainability.

Notes & Sources

¹ <https://www.ncsc.org/Topics/Court-Management/Leadership-and-Change-Management/CCJ-COSCA-Task-Force.aspx>.

² See Resolution 8 of the Conference of Chief Justices, Creating a Conference of Chief Justices/Conference of State Court Administrators Opiate/Opioid Abuse Task Force and Calling on the Federal and State Governments to Increase the Resources Available to Combat the Opiate/Opioid Crisis, <https://ccj.ncsc.org/~media/Microsites/Files/CCJ/Resolutions/20170809-Opiate-Opioid-Crisis.ashx>.

³ <https://www.ncsc.org/rjoi>.

⁴ K. Murphy, M. Becker, J. Locke, C. Kelleher, J. McLeod, and F. Isasi. Finding Solutions to the Prescription Opioid and Heroin Crisis: A Road Map for States (Washington, D.C.: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, July 2016). <https://classic.nga.org/files/live/sites/NGA/files/pdf/2016/1607NGAOpioidRoadMap.pdf>.

⁵ Almost all fifty states and Washington D.C. have created a state opioid task force created by one or more of the three branches of government. The following link provides information about the task force in each state and access to published reports and activities. <https://www.ncsc.org/~media/Files/PDF/Topics/Opioids-and-the-Courts/State%20Opioid%20Task%20Forces%20202519.ashx>.

⁶ A report of the state legislation adopted in response to the opioid crisis can be found at <https://www.ncsc.org/Topics/Court-Management/Leadership-and-Change-Management/Opioids-and-the-Courts.aspx>.

Sources for Additional Information

- Section 5. Coalition Building I: Starting a Coalition. Center for Community Health and Development. <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/promotion-strategies/start-a-coalition/main>.
- Developing an Effective Coalition: An Eight Step Guide. <https://www.preventioninstitute.org/publications/developing-effective-coalitions-an-eight-step-guide>.

