



Overdose Awareness Canvassing and Trusted Community Messenger Program



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Office of
Community Empowerment and Opportunity
CITY OF PHILADELPHIA

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Contents

| | |
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| Overview..... | 3 |
| Meeting Residents Where They Are | 5 |
| Significant Impact Realized | 9 |
| Training Trusted Community Messengers..... | 12 |
| Next Steps | 14 |
| Resources Are Available | 14 |
| More Information | 17 |
| Terms to Know | 18 |
| Acknowledgements | 19 |
| References..... | 20 |



Overview

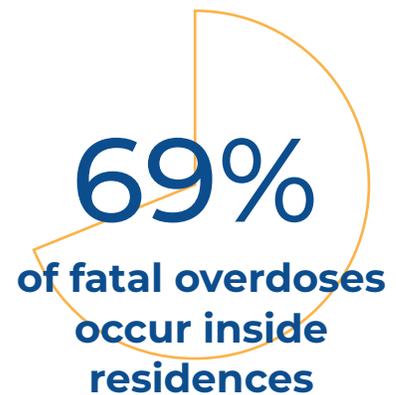
Unequal access to overdose prevention resources, historic racism, and deep stigma have contributed to a pattern of rapidly increasing rates of overdose deaths among Black Philadelphians. In response, the City of Philadelphia developed a bold plan—to bring lifesaving overdose prevention supplies and substance use treatment information directly to Philadelphian’s doors. It is a critical component of a larger citywide effort to address the overdose crisis.

BACKGROUND

In recent years, Philadelphia has seen a significant increase in unintentional overdose deaths among Black and Brown Philadelphians. Between 2019 and 2023, overdose deaths increased by 61% for non-Hispanic Black individuals and 17% for Hispanic individuals.¹ At the same time, overdose deaths decreased by 19% among non-Hispanic white individuals. In the same period, the average age of people who died of fatal overdose in Philadelphia increased from 43 years old to 47. Non-Hispanic Black males were the group with the most overdose deaths in 2023 and the average age of death was 52 years old.

Toxicology reports from 2019 to 2023 show that substances involved in overdose fatalities vary between demographic groups in Philadelphia, a pattern that is reflected nationwide. For example, deaths involving both opioids and stimulants more than doubled among non-Hispanic Black individuals and increased 40% among Hispanic individuals. However, deaths involving opioids and stimulants decreased by 17% among non-Hispanic white individuals. Stimulant-related deaths have also risen sharply among non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic populations in Philadelphia¹.

Historical racism plays a significant role in the current overdose landscape. The War on Drugs, discriminatory legal policy, and social stigma may be reasons why Black and brown Philadelphians are less likely to openly acknowledge drug use² and seek out substance use treatment or overdose prevention tools³. This historical context, along with significant racial inequities in resource distribution, highlights the urgent need for a new approach to address the overdose crisis.



While it may seem that Philadelphia’s overdose crisis is mostly happening in streets or amongst those experiencing homelessness, most fatal overdoses (69%) occur inside residences.³ Often, family members, friends, or roommates are unaware of any substance use, are not in possession of naloxone (Narcan) or other emergency resources to help prevent or respond to an overdose, and therefore are unable to potentially save the lives of their friends and loved ones in the event of an unintentional overdose.

CITY AGENCIES COLLABORATE IN RESPONSE

In the spring of 2023, the City of Philadelphia’s [Overdose Response Unit](#) (ORU) formed the Citywide Outreach and Engagement workgroup to develop a collaborative response to address the increase of overdoses in Black and Brown communities. The goal of the multi-agency workgroup was to better identify overdose prevention and resource gaps, understand how to fill those gaps, and develop a fairer approach to providing overdose prevention tools and treatment information.

The Citywide Outreach and Engagement workgroup gathered a variety of data sources, including maps overlaid with ZIP Codes that showed where overdose rates were increasing and guidance from people with lived experience. Through this work, the group identified gaps in resource distribution. Outreach organizations and agencies have concentrated operations in the Kensington area (ZIP Code 19134.) While fatal overdoses are highest in this ZIP Code and support is much needed in this area, more support is needed in other communities, as resources are not reaching other neighborhoods experiencing increasing rates of overdose fatalities. **The workgroup determined that to address these inequities, lifesaving materials must be given to everyone, automatically, and without question, judgment, or self-identification.**



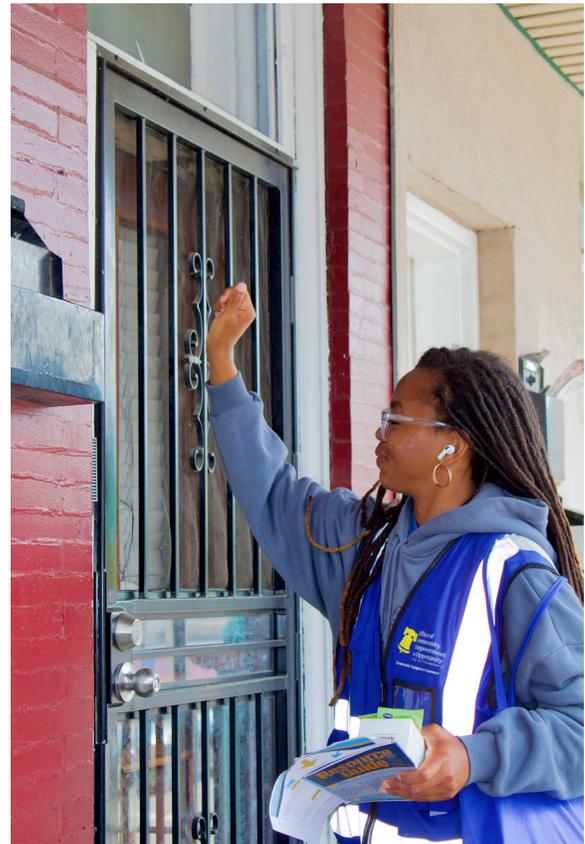
Meeting Residents Where They Are

Through the Citywide Outreach and Engagement workgroup, the Overdose Response Unit (ORU) created a program to provide overdose prevention and reversal resources directly to communities with high rates of fatal overdoses through door-to-door canvassing and community messenger training. ORU contracted with the City's Office of Community Empowerment and Opportunity (CEO) to staff the Community Engagement program with dedicated canvassers and community organizers. The program is funded using National Opioid Settlement funds—money the City of Philadelphia receives as a part of the national settlements to repair damages to communities impacted by the aggressive manufacturing, sale and distribution opioids.

DOOR-TO-DOOR CANVASSING WORKS

In recent years, public health campaigns have seen success in working with community-based organizations and using canvassing to empower residents in impacted communities^{4,5}. These strategies help build trust and tailor messaging to different neighborhoods and communities.

The goal of the canvassing program is to rapidly increase direct outreach in areas of Philadelphia where fatal overdoses are increasing, and resources are lacking. Through a door-to-door approach that engages residents at their homes in these areas, the program also aims to reduce racial disparities that may prevent access to treatment services and overdose prevention resources by partnering with culturally competent community messengers to engage with residents at their homes.





What is in a canvasser's bag?



Naloxone (Narcan): a medication that can reverse an opioid overdose and save someone's life. Naloxone temporarily blocks the effects of opioids, helping a person breathe again.



Fentanyl Test Strips: tools that test for the presence of fentanyl in a substance. Test strips can help people make informed decisions about the substances they are using.

Philly Help Book: a resource guide that compiles multiple city, state, and non-profit resources using plain language. This booklet provides simple information on overdose prevention, treatment options, lifesaving resources and other local resources that address social determinants of health.

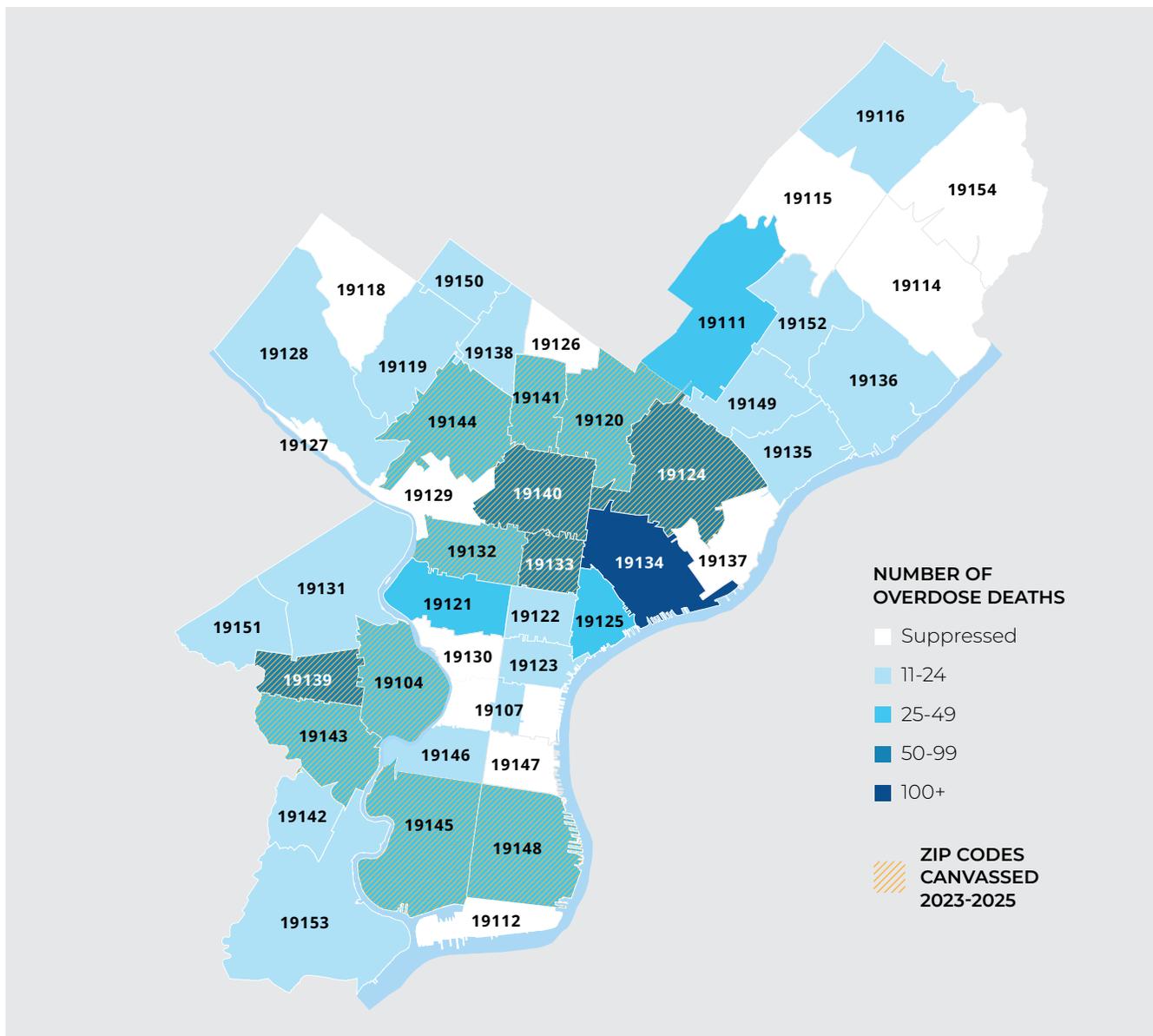
Philly Resource Guide: a guide with local resources for food and housing access, utility assistance, rent and housing assistance, and more.



MEETING RESIDENTS WHERE THEY ARE

To ensure that canvassers feel confident discussing or citing overdose data and comfortable sharing personal and life-changing experiences, multiple city agencies including the Department of Public Health's Substance Use Prevention and Harm Reduction division and the [Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual Disability Services](#), provide regular training to canvassers around substance use, treatment, and overdose trends. The script canvassers use was thoughtfully designed and created to guide interactions with residents, so they are more likely to feel comfortable and open to listening. Being mindful that many of these communities have been historically under-supplied with respect to factual information, the script is designed to support canvassers in sharing up-to-date trends and resources, while collecting minimal data. This approach helps track awareness of the overdose crisis and assess community receptiveness to different resources, without reinforcing harmful surveillance practices.

NUMBER OF OVERDOSE DEATHS BY INCIDENT LOCATION, 2023



MEETING RESIDENTS WHERE THEY ARE

The canvassing teams focus on each ZIP Code block-by-block over the course of a few weeks. In teams of two or three, canvassers walk each block in their designated area and knock on every door.

If canvassers cannot reach a resident, they leave a door-hanging card with information about overdoses and QR codes that link to overdose prevention and treatment resources. When a resident answers the door, canvassers use their script to speak with the resident about the rise in overdose fatalities in the area. Canvassers also offer resources such as the [Philly Help Book](#), free naloxone, fentanyl test strips, and brief training about how to use these tools. Canvassers track responses from residents at each door using a mobile application on their phone. If a resident indicates interest in substance use treatment, canvassers contact mobile outreach teams to provide in-person, one-on-one support and offer transportation for residents in real-time, that same day.

Recognizing that the overdose crisis can best be addressed through multiple, intersectional approaches, canvassers are able to connect residents with Community Health Workers, who assist residents by connecting them to utility and food assistance, and other City resources.

This innovative canvassing program has been well-received by residents and recognized on a national level.



Daliah Heller, Vice President of Drug Use Initiative at Vital Strategies stated that this canvassing method of expanding access to a life-saving drug could be one of the most effective tactics she's ever seen in her 25-plus years of working in harm reduction.

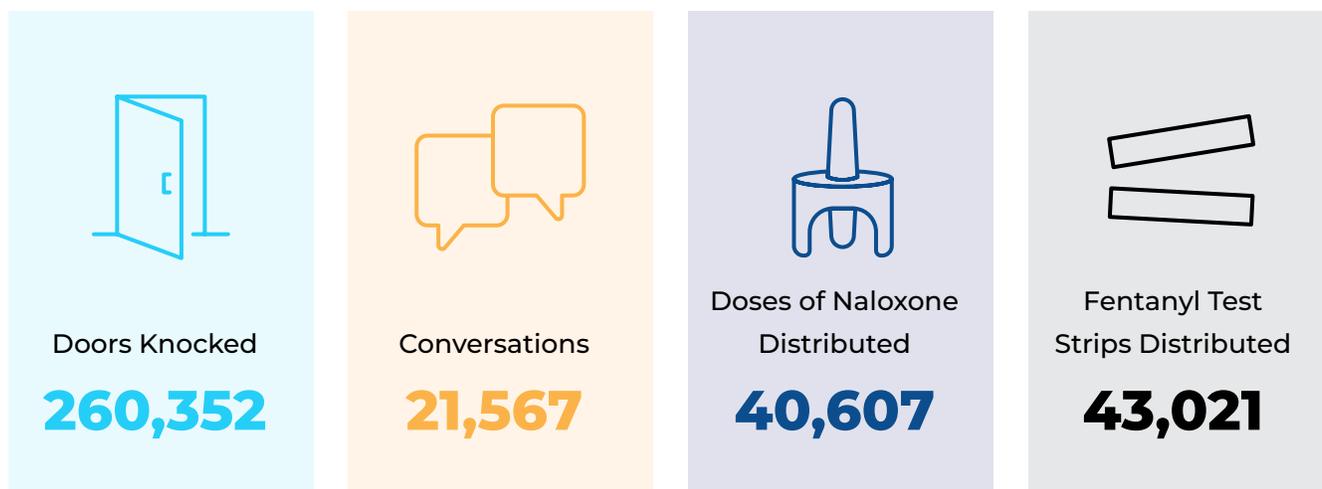
—NPR INTERVIEW



Significant Impact Realized

The initial canvassing locations were identified as ZIP Codes with the highest increases in overdose deaths between 2021 and 2022 and included five priority ZIP Codes outside of Kensington in North and West Philadelphia: 19140, 19124, 19139, 19133, and 19132. These ZIP Codes were canvassed between October 2023 – May 2024, during which canvassers distributed 18,080 doses of naloxone and 21,148 fentanyl test strips.

Between June 1, 2024 and September 30, 2025, additional ZIP Codes were identified for canvassing based on evolving overdose trends and updated data: 19132, 19148, 19145, 19143, 19144, 19141, 19120, 19104. During this timeframe, canvassers knocked on 144,969 doors, distributing 20,392 doses of naloxone and 21,244 fentanyl test strips.



(Program totals from October 10, 2023 – September 30, 2025)

The **contact rate** is the percentage of residents that canvassers successfully reached compared to the total number of doors knocked. While the standard contact rate in Philadelphia is 15-20% (based on previous canvassing efforts), the average contact rate of the canvassing effort was 8%. This lower contact rate may be because of a high number of vacant or inaccessible houses and apartment buildings, and fewer residents at home during canvassing hours.

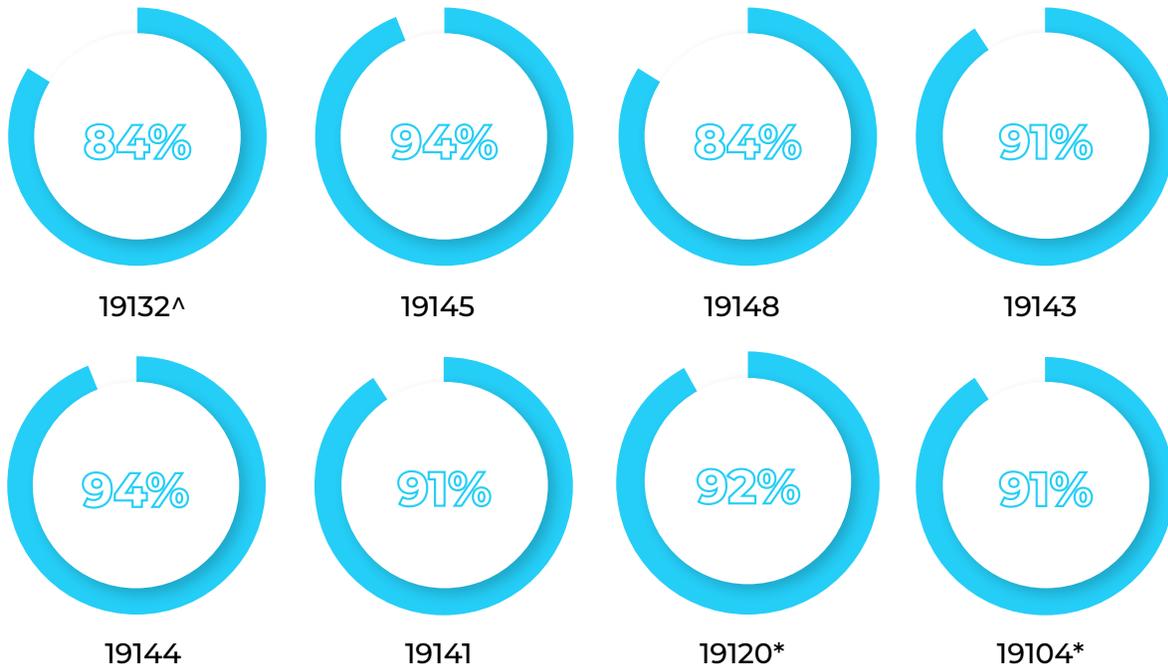


SIGNIFICANT IMPACT REALIZED

ZIP code receptiveness:

Receptiveness is the percentage of residents that canvassers reached that said 'Yes' to accepting naloxone and/or fentanyl test strips. Though there were some differences in receptivity, residents of every ZIP Code were very open to accepting these resources. The percentage of households contacted that said 'Yes' to naloxone and/or fentanyl test strips varied by ZIP code and ranged from approximately 84% to 94%.

HOUSEHOLDS THAT ACCEPTED RESOURCES



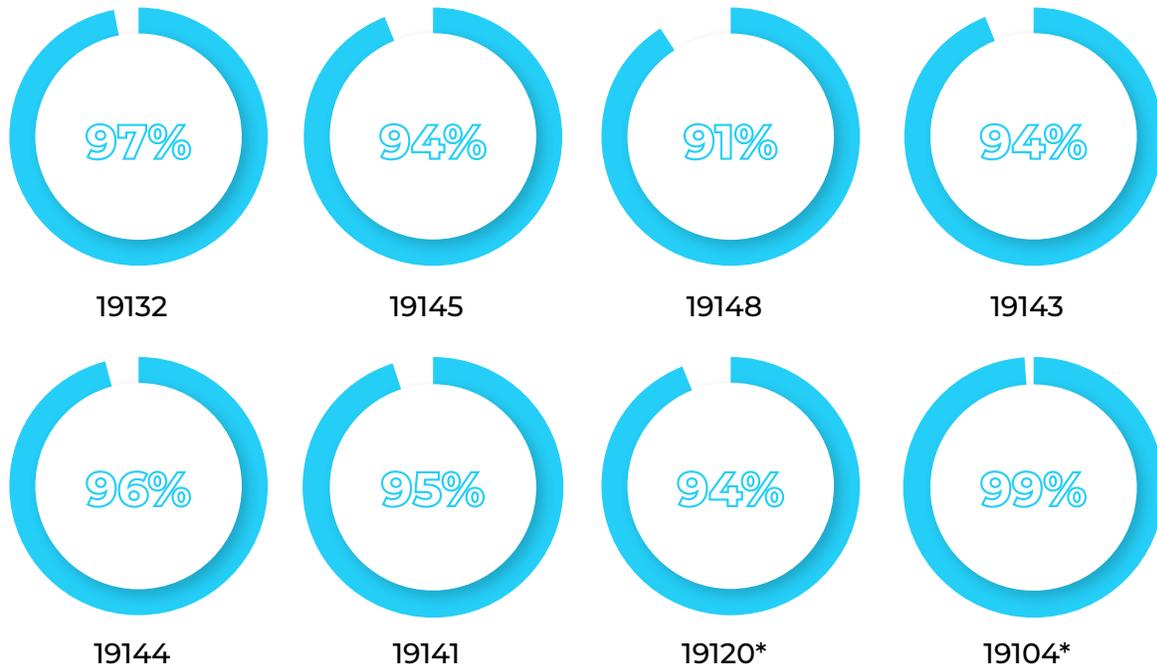
[^] The last report shared only partial data for 19132. Totals reported here reflect finalized rates in 19132.



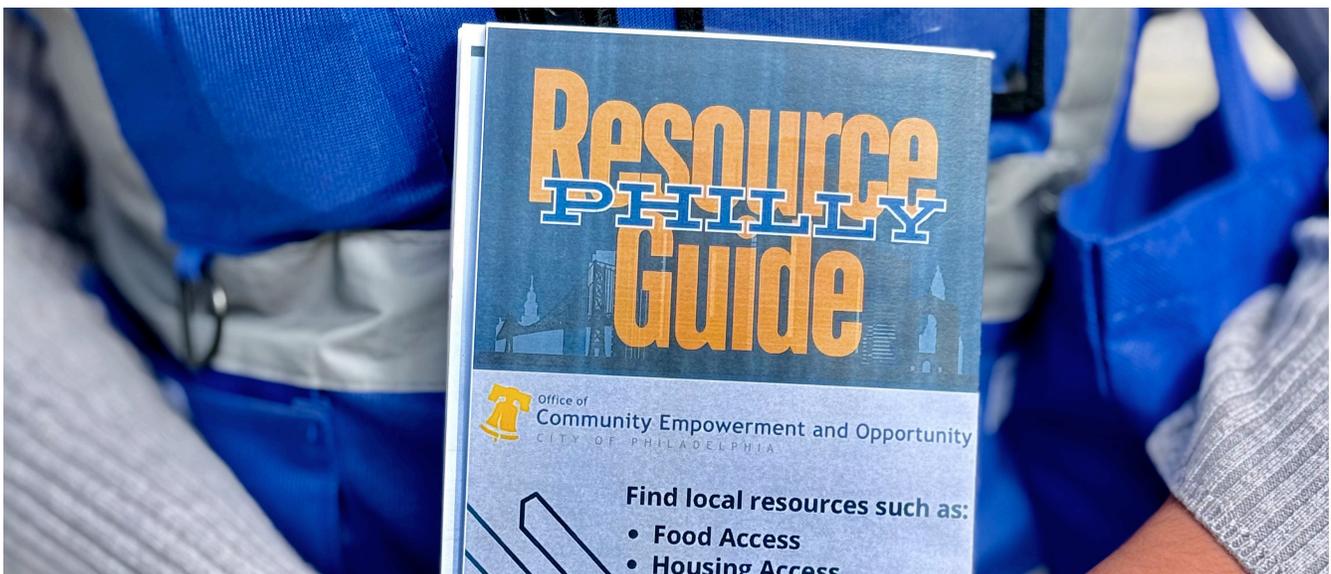
SIGNIFICANT IMPACT REALIZED

Canvassers also asked residents if they were aware of the increase in overdose fatalities in their neighborhoods. The percentage of households contacted, indicating 'Yes', they were aware of the increase, was overwhelmingly high in all ZIP codes canvassed, ranging from about 86% to 99%.

HOUSEHOLDS THAT WERE AWARE OF AN INCREASE IN OVERDOSES



* Canvassing continued in 19120 and 19104 after the report period.



Training Trusted Community Messengers

To support the door-to-door canvassing, CEO community organizers work closely with community-based organizations and neighborhood groups to host Trusted Community Messenger training sessions for larger groups throughout Philadelphia. These training sessions are designed to give a deeper understanding of the overdose crisis in Philadelphia and equip community members with information and resources to care for their families, friends, and neighbors. Attendees also receive a “LifeSaver” kit which includes naloxone, fentanyl test strips, and the Philly Help Book. The goal is to build a strong network so outreach can be expanded and sustained by people who are part of the community.

In each Trusted Community Messenger training, CEO’s community organizers provide:

- An in-depth overview of overdose fatality data and the changing drug supply in Philadelphia;
- An overview of substance use disorder, treatment options, and available resources;
- Overdose reversal and naloxone training; and,
- Fentanyl test strip training.

The average age of death among non-Hispanic Black males, the demographic group with the largest number of overdose fatalities in 2022, was 55 years old¹. Training sessions have been particularly effective at reaching Black Philadelphians, with many participants identifying as 45 years and older.

TRUSTED COMMUNITY MESSENGER PARTNERS TO DATE INCLUDE:

Beckett Life Center

Black Male Community Council of Philadelphia

Center in the Park

CEO Community Resource Corps Connectors

CEO Community Health Workers

Eddie’s House

Frankford CDC

Lower North Philadelphia CDC

ManUP PHL

NET Community Care

New Beginnings Restoration Church

New Pathways

Oak Street Health

Philadelphia Housing Authority

Philadelphia Parks and Recreation

QCA Delta Sigma Theta Sorority INC

Real Men Speak

Representative Ronnie Greene’s Office

Ridge Allegheny Hunting Park Civic Association

Wes Health System, Promise Zone

West Philadelphia Block Captains



TRAINING TRUSTED COMMUNITY MESSENGERS



Through September 2025, CEO's Community Organizers have trained **Over 500 Trusted** Community Messengers.

NOVEMBER 2023 – MAY 2024 (PROGRAM TOTALS)



Trainings Held

38



Residents Trained

504



Naloxone Doses Distributed

1,084



Fentanyl Test Strips Distributed

1,344



Next Steps

Canvassers and trusted community messengers are helping to create a more informed community that can respond to and prevent fatal overdoses, without requiring residents to reveal personal information related to drug use.

MOVING FORWARD

- ORU and CEO will continue the door-to-door canvassing and Trusted Community Messenger programs with the goal of providing all Philadelphians with lifesaving tools and substance use treatment information;
- The city will use data collected from this program to improve access in other communities. Program data will also inform future projects that address the racial disparities in the overdose crisis; and,
- ORU will partner with researchers to better understand community response, gaps, and trends.

Resources Are Available

Call 988 if you or someone you know is having a mental health crisis, struggling with substance use, or having thoughts of suicide.

HOW TO FIND TREATMENT

- Call Community **Behavioral Health (CBH)** member services at 888-545-2600 anytime to get help treating a drug and/or alcohol addiction.
- If you don't have insurance, call Behavioral Health Special Initiative (BHSI) at 215-546-1200.
- Visit [findtreatment.gov](https://www.findtreatment.gov) to find a provider near you.

To request naloxone (Narcan) or fentanyl test strips, visit [substanceusephilly.com/get-supplies](https://www.substanceusephilly.com/get-supplies).





This program has received national media attention due to its innovative approach to tackling the overdose crisis. This effort has not only raised awareness, but also demonstrates the need for increased community-based intervention, highlighting the importance of culturally competent engagement.



NPR | February 26, 2024

To stop fentanyl deaths in Philly, knocking on doors and handing out overdose kits



WHYY | October 23, 2023

Philly adopts new door-to-door canvass approach to prevent drug overdose deaths



The Philadelphia Inquirer | October 23, 2023

Outreach workers hope to knock on 100,000 doors across Philadelphia to



Use of logos is for the purpose of screenshots only and does not indicate sponsorship or affiliation with the canvassing effort.

Presentations

The team has presented about this program at multiple national conferences to highlight the effectiveness of this work and provide other jurisdictions with the resources to launch similar programs in their communities.

American Public Health Association | October 2024

Social Equity Leadership Conference | June 2025

A SPECIAL THANK YOU



We want to say thank you to the hardworking canvassers and community organizers who work to make a difference every day. Their work goes beyond numbers. Each conversation and resource distributed is a step towards a healthier and more informed community.



Acknowledgments

CITY AGENCIES

Office of Community Empowerment and Opportunity **Office of Public Safety's Overdose Response Unit**

Department of Behavioral Health Services and Intellectual disAbilities
Department of Public Health's Division of Substance Use Prevention and Harm Reduction
Office of Public Safety's Division of Criminal Justice
Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority

CANVASSING TEAM

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CANVASSERS

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Khaliph Watson, Lead Canvasser
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Tamara Baldwin
Zykai Gibbs
Leiry Acala
Deserie Custis
Makiyah Batties
Brittney Banks
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Sharonda Mitchell, Lead Canvasser
Marilyn Saez-Perry
Brendan Falterman
Amelia Townes
Krystaliz Robles
Azeem Daveport
Desean Prosser
Mirelle Scutt
Sincere Armstrong

COMMUNITY ORGANIZERS

Taisha Banks, Community Engagement Organizer
Shenae Sutton, Community Engagement Organizer



More Information

SIGNS OF AN OVERDOSE

- Irregular heartbeat
- Slow, shallow or stopped breathing
- Not responding to your voice or touch
- Lips or nails turning gray, purple, or blue

WHAT TO DO IF SOMEONE IS HAVING AN OVERDOSE

If you notice these signs, call 911 immediately and stay with the person until emergency medical services arrive.

If you have naloxone, use it on the person after calling 911.

CARRY NALOXONE AND KNOW HOW TO USE IT:

Scan these QR codes to learn how to use naloxone.



NALOXONE QUICK FACTS:

- Safe and easy to use
- Only works for someone on opioids
- Doesn't hurt if someone is on another drug
- Not addictive and cannot be used to get high
- Takes 2-5 minutes to take effect
- May require more than one dose
- May cause withdrawal in people dependent on opioids
- Stays in the body for 30-90 minutes

HOW TO GET NALOXONE:

Naloxone is available over the counter at pharmacies in Pennsylvania. You do not need a prescription from a doctor to get the medication. If you are insured, getting a prescription may make getting naloxone from a pharmacy more affordable.

To request free naloxone (Narcan) or fentanyl test strips, visit [substanceusephilly.com/get-supplies](https://www.substanceusephilly.com/get-supplies)

For more resources, visit the Division of Substance Use Prevention and Harm Reduction's website: [substanceusephilly.com](https://www.substanceusephilly.com)



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