

Naloxone vending machine program case study



How the Health Care Authority is significantly reversing opioid overdoses in North Central Washington by providing low-barrier access to life saving harm reduction

As Washington state's largest purchaser of health services, the Health Care Authority (HCA) supports the whole-health needs of more than 2.7 million individuals. It has a strong commitment to behavioral health and provides state funded (Medicaid) services for substance use, mental health, and problem gambling.

The challenge

The [opioid overdose epidemic in Washington state](#) escalated between 2000 and 2018, accelerating during the COVID-19 pandemic. The [epidemic continues as overdose deaths](#) involving synthetic opioids, particularly fentanyl, have sharply increased.

[According to the Washington State Department of Health](#), 17,502 Washington residents died from a drug overdose between 2007 and 2021. Sixty-eight percent of those deaths involved an opioid. Since 2019, the annual number of opioid drug overdose deaths has nearly doubled, from 827 deaths in 2019 to 1,619 in 2021.

The State of Washington responded to the opioid crisis by creating the 2021–2022 [Statewide Opioid Response Plan](#). The plan's goals are to prevent opioid misuse, identify and treat substance use disorder, ensure the health of individuals who use drugs, use data to detect opioid misuse, and support individuals in recovery.

Additionally, Washington Governor Jay Inslee signed initiative [SB 5195](#) into law, effective July 25, 2021. The law helps to increase naloxone access for all individuals at risk of an opioid overdose. [The legislation](#) also requires hospital emergency departments (EDs) and many certified and licensed behavioral health settings to distribute prepackaged naloxone to individuals at risk of an opioid overdose.

“This program helps to reduce the stigma individuals often experience when seeking help for opioid addiction,” says Leah Becknell, Account Director, Carelon Behavioral Health.

96%

Success rate in naloxone saving the lives of individuals experiencing an opioid overdose



“Getting naloxone is a small step that may lead an individual to other supports or treatment,” says Christal Eshelman, Program Manager, Carelon Behavioral Health. “The program is saving lives, which is what harm reduction is about.”

64%

Success rate in individuals avoiding a visit to an emergency room or hospital after having administered naloxone

To achieve the state’s goals, the HCA decided to collaborate with partners experienced in creating programs that successfully address opioid use disorders (OUDs).

The solution

HCA selected Carelon Behavioral Health as its partner due to Carelon’s strong reputation for creating and executing programs that successfully combat OUDs.

After accepting the contract, Carelon quickly created and activated a unique pilot program in North Central Washington to address overdoses due to opioid use disorder. Carelon introduced the first Washington state naloxone (Narcan) vending machine program in 2021.

The program offers low-barrier access to the machines. Individuals can walk into one of the area’s partner agencies, make their selection from the vending machine, and the naloxone falls out. The naloxone is free, there is no tracking, and individuals can visit agencies for naloxone as many times as they need. The brand of naloxone available from the machines is Narcan, which individuals administer through a nasal spray.

“An advantage of Narcan is the nasal spray administration. While naloxone can be administered intramuscularly, that method requires syringes, and many community members aren’t comfortable with that option. So, the nasal spray is a lower-barrier option for community accessibility,” says Christal Eshelman, Program Manager, Carelon Behavioral Health.

The result

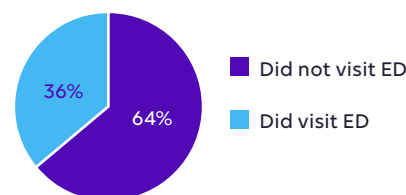
The naloxone vending machine program has proven effective in reversing opioid overdoses and saving lives. It reduces the stigma individuals often experience when seeking help for opioid addiction.

Participants report that the low barrier to access at area partner agencies helps normalize picking up naloxone, encouraging access.

“Carelon’s Washington team performed innovative work by placing Narcan vending machines in various regions throughout North Central Washington,” says Ruth Leonard, MA, SUDP, Section Supervisor, Strategic Design and Program Oversight, Washington State Health Care Authority. “The program has seen amazing results in reducing opioid overdoses. To date, Carelon has placed vending machines in thirteen locations, providing low-barrier access to Narcan kits, in turn saving individuals’ lives. The success of this program is now prompting additional Washington regions to invest in more machines throughout the state. We are proud to work with Carelon on the continued expansion of such a great program.”

The metrics are from the North Central, Southwest, and Pierce regions of Washington State, from October 2021 through April 2024.

Cases in which individuals avoided a visit to the ED



Cases in which Narcan effectively reversed an overdose

