

\$1.4M grant pairs Tucson police with drug counselors in effort to combat opioid crisis

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Dan Barden, vice president of clinical services at Codac Health Recovery and Wellness, talks to officers during training for the new opioid deflection program that gives addicts an alternative to jail.

[Mamta Popat / Arizona Daily Star](#)

As officials continue to grapple with the opioid crisis in Pima County, a new \$1.4 million grant may further those efforts, pairing drug counselors with law enforcement for a more holistic approach.

The grant, from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, is part of a collaboration between the county, the Pima County Sheriff's Department, Tucson Police Department, Codac Health Recovery and Wellness, the University of Arizona Southwest Institute for Research on Women, Arizona Superior Court Pretrial Services and Cenpatico.

It will support Pima County's new project, United Medication Assisted Treatment Targeted Engagement Response, or U-MATTER, and will run through Sept. 29, 2021. The Pima County Board of Supervisors is to vote on the grant at Tuesday's meeting.

The U-MATTER project, which complements TPD's recently implemented opioid-deflection program, will provide peer-supported case management for people who receive medication-assisted treatment, which involves the use of medications such as Vivitrol, methadone or Suboxone, which ease the symptoms of opioid dependence and withdrawal.

On July 1, TPD rolled out its deflection program in its midtown and west-side divisions. The three-pronged program gives opioid addicts the ability to be placed into treatment with no risk of jail. It involves self-referral by drug users and outreach by officers and caseworkers to connect with people who recently overdosed or fell out of drug treatment.

The U-MATTER project will take the deflection program several steps further, pairing Codac drug counselors, known as peer navigators, with TPD's Mental Health Support Team, or MHST, to respond to overdoses and mental-health calls.

The grant will pay for two peer navigators to serve within the MHST unit and follow up with people post-overdose or post-deflection to make sure they're keeping up with their treatment, said Terrance Cheung, Pima County's director of justice reform initiatives.

"Just like smoking, you're not ready to stop smoking until you say in your mind, 'I'm ready to do this,'" Cheung said.

"It's the same thing with this population. Simply because we're deflecting them doesn't necessarily mean they're ready for treatment. So you kind of have to repeat this over and over again, but it's still an alternative to jail."

Over the last three months, 66 people have opted into TPD's deflection program to avoid arrest, two people self-referred for treatment and 14 people enrolled via social referrals, which means they either approached officers on the street or were contacted and offered treatment without the presence of criminal charges.

"It started out really busy and then it slowed down a little bit, then it started getting really busy again," Dan Barden, Codac's vice president of clinical services, told the Star.

"We're probably averaging at least one a day right now."

Barden said organizers of the program were hopeful that it would generate this level of success, but expected it to take longer to ramp up.

"It's great to see the extent that TPD has bought into this and the officers are buying into this," Barden said. "I want people to be aware of really how cutting-edge our Police Department is in getting this started."

It's unclear what's led to the program's early success, but Barden attributes increasing public education and awareness coupled with decreasing stigma surrounding the opioid crisis, with nearly everyone knowing a person who is or has been impacted by addiction.

“It’s not like people thought once upon a time, it’s not necessarily limited to a specific socioeconomic class, this is across society,” Barden said. “But I think anyone that reads the news can see the numbers, they know the stories. I think that’s had a huge influence on how people are viewing the opioid crisis now.”

The program has already impacted dozens of people by keeping them out of jail and getting them into treatment, but organizers of U-MATTER anticipate a much greater reach.

The county decided to partner with TPD for the U-MATTER program since half of the people booked into the Pima County jail come from TPD’s jurisdiction, Cheung said.

“Since they’re the largest agency that has a pathway of law enforcement engagements to jail, we thought that they would be a good first start for us, and because they have a really deep and robust mental-health support team program,” Cheung said, adding that TPD already deflects people in mental-health crisis, so the grant essentially expands that role into substance abuse.

Codac has already hired the U-MATTER peer navigators, who are getting ready to start training, Braden said.

The second and third years of the grant will fund two more navigators, which would allow the program to expand its coverage to nights and weekends, Cheung said.

The grant will also pay for research and evaluation of the project, calculating a return and success rate for people who enter into deflection or medication-assisted treatment. From there, U-MATTER officials will continue to evaluate and look at expanding populations of addicted adults, including the elderly and postpartum women.

Navigators will work closely with Pretrial Services, making sure that people under court supervision have ready access to case support and peer management to handle their addiction, Cheung said.

“We’re trying to be really deliberate and careful in how we’re expanding this program, because ... most of the people in jail either have a substance-use issue or a mental-health issue,” Cheung said. “We’re trying to figure out how to do this and manage the caseload while being able to track and evaluate the impacts of this.”

The grant will also provide money for training sheriff’s deputies and other local partners in skills like motivational interviews and other components to make the project successful.

For the time being, Cheung is acting as program manager, but the county will soon begin the process of hiring a full-time U-MATTER program manager.

U-MATTER goes hand-in-hand with the Pima County Safety and Justice Challenge, a multi-year grant designed to reduce the jail population. When the challenge started in 2015, the largest population in the Pima County jail was people being held on misdemeanors, which has since been drastically reduced.

Currently, nonviolent drug offenders make up the largest population in the jail, which has shifted the challenge's strategies and goals.

“This is really an expansion of the work we’ve done as part of the Safety and Justice Challenge. SJC only funds so much, but we see that there’s a greater need, so we go after different grants and funding opportunities to really address this other population,” Cheung said.

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