

Executive Summary

Mitchell County Opioid Planning Needs Assessment Report

September 2023



This Executive Summary includes highlights from a report that is Part 1 of a multi-part assessment process and compiles existing data related to substance use (particularly opioid use) in Mitchell County. The information presented in this executive summary and the full report is intended to be one tool to support decision making around the use of local opioid settlement funds. It should be considered alongside the learnings and recommendations from the concurrent community learning process around opioid and substance use in Mitchell and Yancey Counties, as well as other local information-gathering work.

Background

In 2022, Mitchell County received a grant from the Dogwood Health Trust to conduct opioid-related collaborative assessment and planning in advance of the distribution of proceeds from the \$26 billion national opioid settlement agreement announced in July 2021.

Methods: With input from a Steering Committee of local community partners, the consultant for the report (WNC Health Network) reviewed and synthesized a range of existing, publicly-available data sets, assessments, and strategic plans. They also conducted interviews with 10 key local individuals identified by the Steering Committee who are connected to substance use/opioid use in Mitchell County.

Report Highlights

Residents of Mitchell County have experienced - and continue to experience - enormous social, health, and economic burden resulting from drug-related overdose, treatment, recovery and other costs.

More than half of Mitchell County residents (54%) said their lives had been negatively affected by their own or someone else's substance use (WNC Health Network, 2021). More than one in ten (11%) Mitchell County residents report using opioids in the past year, with or without a prescription (WNCHN, 2021). In 2021 (the most recent year for which data is available), the rate of unintentional overdose deaths in Mitchell County was higher than the statewide rate, which continue to rise.

In 2021, 16 percent of Mitchell County residents received dispensed opioid pills. This is significantly higher than the statewide percent (13%) (NC DHHS, 2023). However, key informants say prescription opioids seem to be playing a smaller role in Mitchell County than they once did. Emergency Department visits related to psychostimulants (which include methamphetamines) and polysubstance use (in which more than one substance is involved) are increasing across the 18-county region of western North Carolina (Tallman, 2022).

Calls made to local 911 for drug-related (59) or overdose/poisoning (62) remain high in FY 22-23 (Mitchell County 911 data). Mitchell County EMS reported 16 naloxone administrations in 2022, and 15 administrations in the first 7 months of 2023 alone (January through July) (Mitchell Medics data).

Mitchell County's rate of newborn hospitalizations associated with drug withdrawal syndrome is 30 percent higher than the WNC region and 216 percent higher than the North Carolina statewide rate (NC DHHS, 2023). Approximately 73 percent of all children in Mitchell County DSS custody are there due to substance use by a parent or caregiver (Block, 2023). The percentage of households in Mitchell County with one or more children under 18 years of age in which a grandparent is responsible for raising grandchildren without a parent present is as high as 5.2 percent in the southern part of the county. This is one of the higher percentages in the WNC region (American Community Survey, 2021).

In Mitchell County, the rate of patients with opioid use disorder who are receiving buprenorphine (a medication for opioid use disorder) and the rate of patients with Medicaid served by treatment programs is significantly higher than the statewide average rates. Mitchell County has multiple behavioral health service providers (including a range of professionals who specialize in mental health and substance use services) and other community-based programs and supports for substance use prevention, treatment and recovery. However, barriers exist for some people to access these existing services, and they are not able to meet the full demand.

Who is affected by substance use in Mitchell County? Key informants say many people across Mitchell County are affected, and some groups of people are more affected by challenges related to substance use, including: young people; families; people who are low- or very low income; and people who experience mental health-related issues. People who work within systems that connect to substance use are also affected, including social workers and first responders.

What is getting in the way of efforts to address substance use in Mitchell County?

- There is an overall lack of consistency and support for people who use substances, including lack of (and barriers to accessing existing) detox and treatment resources, inadequate services and barriers within the criminal justice system, and negative community attitudes and stigma toward people who use substances.
- Lack of access to resources for basic needs, particularly housing and transportation, continue to be major barriers to greater stability and support for people who use substances.
- Existing services for substance use and mental health in Mitchell County are very limited, and challenges exist to expanding access to these services to more people, such as limited office hours, barriers to accessing or using insurance or Medicaid to pay for services, and lack of widespread public knowledge about what resources are available.

What is helping to address substance use in Mitchell County?

Despite the many challenges, there are already many local efforts and assets that are helping address this issue, including: existing local treatment options and other community-based programs, resources and supports; a visible and vibrant recovery community; and growing community awareness and desire to support.

What could work to do better?

Key informants identified a range of approaches that could work to do better locally, including: more treatment options and resources designed for Mitchell County; more peer support; support for mothers and children; support for housing, transportation, and other basic needs; effective messaging and outreach; greater visibility and support for recovery; prevention-focused efforts; and funding.

More details and a complete list of references are available in the full report:
[LINK](#)

**Thank you to the Steering Committee and key informants to this process.
Your time, energy and care are deeply appreciated!**

For More Information

It will take all of us to address this issue in our communities!

**For more information or to learn how you can connect with local opioid settlement planning efforts, contact Glenda Shuffler
(Human.Resources@mitchellcountync.gov).**