



*The Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force is committed to being a leader in identifying issues faced by all people affected by mental illness, facilitating improvements in mental health services, giving consumers and families a strong voice, reducing stigma, and implementing recovery principles.*

## **Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force Testimony Milwaukee County Mental Health Board Meeting**

**Delivered by Susan Gadacz – MHTF Steering Committee Member  
September 23, 2021**

Thank you, Chairperson Perez, and members of the Milwaukee County Mental Health Board (MCMHB) for this opportunity to share the Mental Health Task Force's priorities for the provision of mental health and substance use disorder services in the county.

The emergence of COVID-19 in early 2020 raised fears that already-rising drug overdose deaths could surge even further amid social isolation, social unrest, economic insecurity, and disrupted access to treatment facilities and providers. On July 14, 2021, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated 93,331 drug overdose deaths in the United States during 2020, and synthetic opioids were involved in more than sixty percent of those overdose deaths. In 2020, 463 individuals died of opioid overdoses in Milwaukee County. The rate of opioid overdose deaths in Milwaukee County is 44.6 per 100,000 deaths; the statewide rate is 21.1 per 100,000 deaths. Sadly, African Americans outpace all other groups in the increased rate of opioid overdose deaths in Milwaukee County. Our County is facing an urgent drug epidemic that requires new strategies to save lives. The Mental Health Task Force (MHTF) felt compelled to respond to these data through the platform of our annual Forum.

The MHTF recently hosted our annual Karen Avery Forum on September 14<sup>th</sup> and this year's topic was, "Celebrating Recovery, Ending Stigma, Embracing Possibilities." Our 2021 Forum identified opportunities to address substance use disorders (SUD) as a public health concern and normalized harm reduction strategies. We heard from international speakers on the topics of harm reduction and the many pathways of recovery.

The forum also included a Community Voice Panel, featuring the voices of those in recovery and service providers. Panel members shared what was helpful to support their own recovery journey, as well as examples of effective and non-stigmatizing treatment options available in Milwaukee County and elsewhere in Wisconsin. A recording of the forum and forum resources is available at: <https://www.milwaukeeemhtf.org/2021/09/13/2021-karen-avery-forum-materials-and-resources/>

While there are many things working well to address SUD in Milwaukee, including peer run respite, recovery support services, and the Narcan Direct program, the ever-increasing number of overdose deaths signals that we must do much more.

Forum participants offered tangible strategies to address this worsening epidemic. One clear theme was strengthening harm reduction services. Harm reduction does not attempt to minimize or ignore the real and tragic harm and danger associated with licit and illicit drug use. Harm reduction recognizes that many people are not able or willing to stop using drugs.

Therefore, we must keep people alive and encourage people to work on healthy behavior change. The county should consider a needs-based naloxone distribution program, that emphasizes the following:

- Empower and provide technical assistance to Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) service providers to establish and sustain their own programs
- Ensure low threshold access to services
- Maximize access by number of locations and available hours
- Locations should focus on where people naturally gather and feel comfortable getting care
- Ensure anonymity of participants
- Minimize the administrative burden of participation
- Provide services for free
- Promote secondary naloxone distribution to family members, neighbors, and friends
- Train and support BIPOC peer educators and outreach workers
- Do not impose limits on number of naloxone kits

Current state law prohibits the distribution of fentanyl test strips. The inclusion of fentanyl test strips as drug paraphernalia is a gross misrepresentation of the intent of those live saving tools. The Mental Health Task Force recommends that the MCMHB join the call to remove fentanyl test strips as illegal in the efforts to save lives.

Our speakers and breakout groups were united in identifying some of the key success factors to support recovery as offering a broad continuum of services including access to housing, encouraging voluntary treatment, treating people with dignity and respect, having recovery coaches and peer specialists as a resource, and having a workforce that reflects Milwaukee's diversity and support clients in a linguistically and culturally appropriate manner.

Placing culture first allows the county to address racial segregation by meeting the diverse needs of the citizens of the county. We must also ensure that we are meeting needs of individuals who are deaf and train clinicians in deaf culture to ensure equitable access to care and to embrace the many pathways needed to recover from an SUD.

Recovery is not possible without safe decent housing. Access to safe affordable housing continues to be an ongoing challenge for many clients. Housing is a basic human right and the expansion of peer run respite, recovery housing, and partnering with the Milwaukee Housing Division for permanent housing options offers environmental strategies to those trying to stay on a recovery pathway.

In closing, this testimony is a call to action to the Mental Health Board. The house is on fire – our community is in crisis. As leaders who set the direction for policy and practices to support those who are living with a substance use disorder, we ask you to take action to advance harm reduction and identify new possibilities for our community to support recovery and access to treatment. Mental Health Task Force members are ready and willing to be a resource to the Mental Health Board and the BHD staff. As we continue to recognize September as National Recovery Month, we are reminded every day that with commitment and support, those impacted by substance use disorders can embark on a journey of improved health and overall wellness.

Thank you for your consideration of our testimony, and for your service on the Mental Health Board.