

Bridging Generations: Building Futures

Opioid Crisis Prevention

Authors: LaTonya Williams, Quandra Obi, Dr. Samantha Fields, Tamara Barber, Uzma Azhar

Overview of Opioids

Opioids are a class of natural, semi-synthetic, and synthetic drugs, including prescription medications for pain and illegal drugs like heroin. They are highly addictive, and high doses can lead to life-threatening overdoses.¹

Prevention Services in Georgia

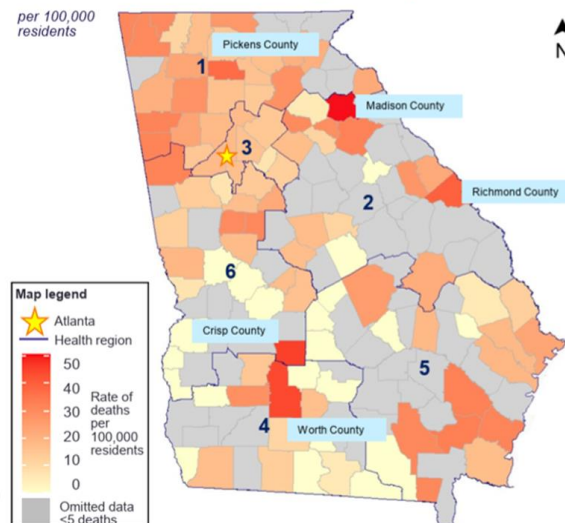
The goal of Georgia's prevention services is to reduce the risk of substance use disorders through evidence-based strategies for children and adults. Service categories target the following groups of individuals:

- *Universal Services:* Target the general population
- *Selected Services:* Target individuals or sub-groups with a higher-than-average risk of developing substance use disorders
- *Indicated Services:* Target high-risk individuals showing minimal but detectable signs or symptoms of mental, emotional, or behavioral disorders²

Georgia's Opioid Landscape 2018 - 2022³

- *Opioid Overdose Death Rate:* Increased from 8.2 to 18.1 per 100,000 residents of all ages.
 - Adolescents (ages 10 - 19) experienced the largest rate increase at 210%.
 - Rural counties experienced the highest rates.
- *Emergency Department (ED) Visits:* Adolescents had the second-highest increase in opioid-related ED visits at 52%, with the highest rates in north Georgia.
- *Demographic Impact:* The White population experienced the largest number of opioid overdose deaths and ED visits, particularly in rural regions. White males were the most impacted group.

Rates of Overdose Deaths by County, 2022



Target Population

Adolescence (ages 10-19) is a critical period for cognitive, social, and emotional development. Effective substance use prevention involves increasing protective factors and reducing risk factors at the biological, psychological, family, and community levels.⁴ Additionally, **youth prevention programs have a very favorable return on investment of \$18 dollars for every dollar spent.**⁵

¹ National Institute of Drug Abuse. (November 22, 2024). Opioids. <https://nida.nih.gov/research-topics/opioids>

² Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities. Office of Addictive Diseases. Continuum of Care.

³ Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities. (January 2024). Opioid Use Disorder Continuum of Care Statewide Assessment Report. <https://www.gaopioidtrust.org/for-applicants/Statewide%20Report.pdf>

⁴ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2019). The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25388>.

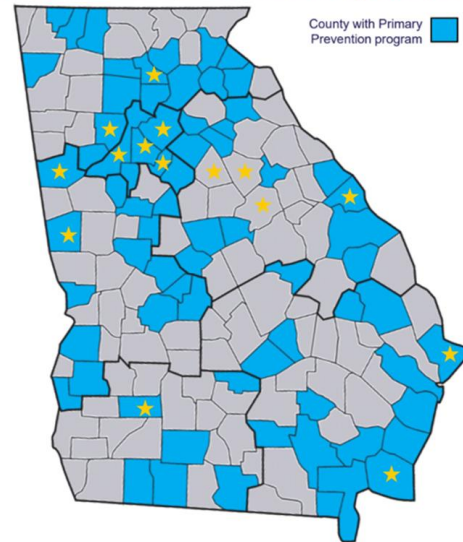
⁵ Miller, T. and Hendrie, D. (2008). Substance Abuse Prevention Dollars and Cents: A Cost-Benefit Analysis, DHHS Pub. No. (SMA) 07-4298. Rockville, MD: Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. <https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/cost-benefits-prevention.pdf>

Existing Prevention Initiatives for Youth

While Primary Prevention programs and services are offered in all six Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD) regions across the state, there are still gaps that need to be filled as only **71 of 159 counties (less than 45%)** in Georgia have active opioid use disorder/substance use disorder (OUD/SUD) Primary Prevention programs as of 2022 (see accompanying map). This includes Sources of Strength at 63 sites; Partners in Prevention Project (PIP) in 34 counties; and 18 colleges in partnership programs through the College of Prevention Project Expansion, Latin X Behavioral Health Initiative and the HBCU Behavioral Health Initiative across Georgia in 29 middle and high schools across Regions 1, 3, and 6. **Region 1, an area with high need, had prevention programs in only a little more than half of its counties.**⁶

Our group reviewed 4 exemplary models funded and recommended by DBHDD (denoted by stars on the map).

Counties with Primary Prevention Programs, 2022



<45% of Georgia's Counties

1. Prevention Clubhouse Model:

- Culturally responsive programming reflects community needs.
- Services: Mentoring, community service, educational services, employment services, nutrition & health education, family involvement, and clubhouse activities
- Locations: Augusta, Camden County, Dawsonville, LaGrange, and Norcross

2. Black Boys Better:

- Mental health initiative for Black male middle and high school students
- Services: Address mental health challenges, creative expression, conflict resolution, social and emotional learning, and mentorship
- Locations: Clayton, Chatham, Fulton, Hancock, and Henry counties

3. Georgia PAST Project:

- Peer leadership program training youth to support younger students during middle and high school transitions
- Services: Drug education, peer pressure resistance, and handling school changes
- Locations: Fulton, DeKalb, Rockdale, and Newton counties

4. Sources of Strength:

- Youth mental health promotion program focusing on suicide prevention, substance misuse, violence, and bullying. Expanded to include a K-5 curriculum tailored to community needs
- Services: Builds protective measures such as help seeking, belonging, and resilience
- Locations: Across Georgia (Our group focused on Dougherty County's implementation.)

⁶ Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities. (January 2024). Opioid Use Disorder Continuum of Care Statewide Assessment Report.

Essential Components of Successful Programs

While prevention programming can vary, the group identified four core elements of effective and evidence-based programs.

1. Supporting Positive Behavioral Health:
 - Social and emotional learning (SEL) programs help youth develop social skills, manage themselves, and make positive decisions.
 - The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework addresses self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making.
2. Peer-To-Peer Support:
 - Effective for mental health challenges, substance use disorders, and chronic health conditions for youth and adults
 - Protects against stress, anxiety, depression, and suicide risk
 - Peer support groups should be culturally adapted and ensure language accessibility.
3. Mentorship:
 - Mentors support youth personally, academically, and professionally.
 - Positive adult role models can offset risks associated with adolescent substance use.
4. Family Engagement
 - Educated and empowered parents and guardians are the first line of defense in preventing illicit drug use by students.
 - Strong positive family ties, social connections, emotional health, and feelings of control help people avoid substance misuse.

Recommendations

Provide robust funding and support for the Clubhouse Model and complement it with multigenerational supports to enhance youth and family well-being.

- Consider implementing the model in north Georgia, a region identified as having a high need, to ensure targeted support for communities that can optimally benefit from these initiatives.
- Dedicate a liaison at DBHDD to help Clubhouse Models navigate accessing funds and resources to operate effectively.

Funding:

- Invest in prevention services using the Georgia Opioid Crisis Abatement Trust to significantly enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of the evidence-based Clubhouse Model.
 - The Principles for the Use of Funds from the Opioid Litigation identifies investing in youth prevention programs as one of five principles to inform the spending and allocation of litigation funds.
 - Georgia can achieve substantial cost savings by allocating these funds to prevention services.
- Leverage Medicaid funding for Clubhouse Model services and ensure Medicaid care management organizations (CMOs) reimburse for preventative services such as peer support.
 - Georgia can ensure future cost savings and sustainability of the Clubhouse Model by using Medicaid funds for preventative services.

- Georgia can use lessons from other states such as Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, Maine, Hawaii, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, North Carolina, and Utah in utilizing Medicaid to fund Clubhouse Model services.

Partnerships

- Form partnerships with community-based organizations, such as afterschool programs, summer learning initiatives, and weekend activities, to expand the reach and impact of Clubhouse Model services.
 - Many afterschool programs including LIFT Youth Center have contracted with behavioral health providers to facilitate training and group therapy for youth to prevent at-risk behaviors.
- Collaborate with programs like Georgia Apex and school-based mental health programs to extend services to youth during school and out-of-school time, providing continuous support.

2Gen Approach

- Provide opportunities for family engagement and education to enhance the effectiveness of prevention efforts.
 - Conduct needs assessments to determine family needs during intake.
 - Host family nights and fun events for guardians/caretakers to participate in and build relationships. Consider hosting events at convenient times and locations for family members and providing meals to encourage participation.
- Incorporate peer-to-peer support for youth and family members to create a supportive home environment and foster a sense of ownership and empowerment within the community.
 - Create a volunteer program where family members—parents, guardians, and older siblings—or community members can be trained as liaisons or peer supporters and leverage their unique insights and connections to foster a supportive community environment.
- Provide opportunities for professional development to youth and their family members.
 - Develop a partnership with the Technical College System of Georgia so families can access cost-effective training opportunities for in-demand occupations.
 - Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) programs provide funding and support for employment and training services for youth and adults, which can be leveraged to offer additional resources and support to families.

Awareness Building & Training

- Provide training on recognizing trauma, behavioral challenges, and signs of substance use (e.g., Trauma Informed Care and Youth Mental Health First Aid) for people working with children.
- Leverage existing training and resources to develop teen-led or -focused mental health support programs and initiatives (e.g., Sources of Strength, Teen Mental Health First Aid, and Free Your Feels).



Scan the QR code to access our research.