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# Vending Machines Dispense Narcan to Reverse Opioid Overdoses

Cities, aid groups stock vending machines near drug users to help prevent deaths

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Updated Nov. 21, 2022 11:55 am ET

Vending machines stocked with overdose-reversing nasal spray are part of the latest attempt to diminish a record tide of drug deaths.

The Food and Drug Administration and some states have loosened restrictions on drugs including Narcan that are sprayed into the nose to reverse an opioid overdose.

Nonprofits that work with opioid users are distributing more of the drugs as a result. Getting Narcan as close as possible to people at risk for an overdose is essential to saving lives, they said.

“If we hadn’t had that vending machine, I might not have had my brother alive today,” said LuDene LoyaltyGroves, who works at a homeless shelter in Moses Lake, Wash. People staying with her brother in a nearby encampment retrieved Narcan from a vending machine at the shelter and used it to revive him repeatedly, she said.

Drug-overdose deaths topped 108,000 last year, a record fueled by the potent illicit opioid fentanyl.

Fentanyl has pervaded the drug supply, killing people who don’t know it is in cocaine or fake pills. It is also killing habitual users who mix it with drugs including methamphetamine.

The vending machines aim to make it easier for drug users to get overdose antidotes themselves. A five-year project through 2021 led by the University of Washington found that 94% of overdose reversals are administered by opioid users. Less than 1% of the 8,711 overdoses recorded during the project were reversed with the help of EMTs or police.

Aid groups that work with drug users are driving new business to vending-machine makers. The Wittern Group said it first got a call from an aid group in Las Vegas in 2018 asking the 90-year-old vending machine company to outfit a few used machines to dispense Narcan. Last year, more than 100 groups that dispense free Narcan to users called to request quotes for vending machines that cost up to \$12,000.

Wittern said its customers include a Rhode Island group that provides clean needles to drug users as well as Yale University and agencies in California that received funding from Anthem Blue Cross. Some social-service agencies are stocking free snacks, condoms and socks alongside Narcan. Others have added kits that test drugs for fentanyl.

“They’re putting them in fire stations, jails, churches, places that are public,” said Julie Burgess, head of a division Wittern created to handle higher demand from groups distributing Narcan.



Packets of Narcan are free at a vending machine in Wayne State University’s undergraduate library.

PHOTO: JIM WEST/ZUMA PRESS

Shaffer Distributing Co. said its first order for a machine to dispense free Narcan came from Wayne State University in Detroit in 2021 as overdose deaths were soaring. Marty Turner, director of vending-equipment sales for the Columbus, Ohio-based company, said he has sold 200 such vending machines since then. Shaffer’s prices range from \$3,400 for a basic machine to \$11,000 for a WiFi-enabled, temperature-controlled version.

“Purely through word-of-mouth, it just took off,” Mr. Turner said.

The Central Washington Recovery Coalition, a nonprofit that helps drug users, installed a machine in each of three rural counties last year. Overdose deaths in the region have risen 500% in a year. The machines have dispensed about 50 Narcan kits a month per machine, said Joey Hunter, who helped found the coalition.

The group and its partners pay about \$12,500 for 250 doses of Narcan, Mr. Hunter said. Narcan is the brand name for nasal spray naloxone, made by Emergent BioSolutions Inc. People who have used the kits have reported via a QR code on the packaging that the drugs have reversed 55 overdoses.

“For the people who aren’t ready for treatment, it’s saving a lot of tax dollars because they’re doing those reversals themselves,” Mr. Hunter said.

Caracole, an HIV-services nonprofit that works with drug users in Cincinnati, said it installed a Narcan vending machine outside its offices last year because fewer people were coming into clinics to pick up the medication during the pandemic. Narcan dispensed from the machine has reversed 596 overdoses, according to Caracole Chief Executive Linda Seiter.

“We’re helping to keep people alive,” she said. Local prosecutors opposed the group’s suggestion to also stock syringes in the machine, she added.

To use the vending machine, people receive a code from the nonprofit and then punch it in to retrieve doses for three months. People can get up to eight doses of Narcan a week. It often takes multiple doses to revive someone who has overdosed, Ms. Seiter said. The machines also hold fentanyl test strips, which can be dipped into water in which drugs have been dissolved to determine whether fentanyl is present.



Wayne State University has placed 15 Narcan vending machines.

PHOTO: JIM WEST/ZUMA PRESS

Kenneth Mattingly, the chief of police in Vine Grove, Ky., installed a Narcan machine outside a police department so small that Mr. Mattingly often picks up the phone when residents call. Within a day after it was installed on Sept. 29, the machine was emptied of 36 boxes of Narcan, Mr. Mattingly said. On Nov. 9, he refilled the machine for the seventh time in just over a month.

The town of 7,000 has recorded two overdoses in recent weeks and he himself revived both people with Narcan, he said. Surrounding Hardin County has recorded 48 overdose deaths this year, after 50 overdose deaths in 2021.

“For my agency, a death investigation is taxing,” Mr. Mattingly said.

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