

Colorado Consortium for Prescription Drug Misuse Prevention

Affected Families & Friends Work Group

February 19, 2026 from 12 to 1:30 p.m. via Zoom

(The following minutes and discussion are for informational purposes only and do not represent the position of the University of Colorado.)

Present:

Sarah Werner and Tracy Ritter, Co-chairs
Andrea Thomas, Voices of Awareness
Sukhie Sanhu, MD, Colorado Children's Hospital
Ally Arnaiz, Denver Department of Public Health & Environment
Kyle Jones, Department of Corrections
Robert Fowler, PharmD, Otero County Coroner
Kelly Lear, MD, Arapahoe County Coroner
Emily Russell-Kinsley, MD, El Paso County Coroner
Annette Cannon, PhD, Jefferson County Coroner
Josephine Wallace, Morgan County Deputy Coroner
Community Members: Marlo Alston, Carrie Paulson, Gigi
Consortium: Jen Place, Hilary Bryant, Jessica Eaddy, Shayna Micucci, Rosemarie MacDowell

Absent: See attached roster.

Sarah Werner, Affected Families & Friends Work Group Co-chair, called the meeting to order at 12:05 p.m. She provided a brief overview of the work group's current projects as well as the meeting agenda.

Approval of Minutes:

A motion was made to approve the November 2025 meeting minutes. Motion approved.

Discussion: Overdose Fatalities from the Perspective of Colorado Coroners:

Robert (Bob) Fowler, Otero County: El Paso County performs all Otero County autopsies and toxicology testing. Overdose deaths have included a father and both sons. Most deaths are accidental, and fentanyl is commonly found. There is a gang presence in Otero County, as the county is located on a route from Mexico. There has been a decrease in deaths in the past two years, likely due to law enforcement presence. Bob Fowler collaborates with the school districts to educate faculty members regarding drug behaviors.

Dr. Kelly Lear, Arapahoe County: The county has approximately 200 overdose deaths annually. Most deaths are due to fentanyl and methamphetamine. In 2024, there were about 20 fewer overdose deaths. While other illicit drugs are also an issue, Arapahoe County has not seen many designer drugs.

Dr. Emily Russell-Kinsley, El Paso County: In 2023, fentanyl overdose deaths exceeded deaths caused by the use of methamphetamine. Methamphetamine then returned as the primary cause of death. The county is obtaining a new RABTA (Random Access Biochip Technology

Analyser) that will identify many more drugs. If required, outside testing is done by NMS Labs or the Center for Forensic Sciences Research & Education (CFSRE). Other illicit substances they have identified include bromazepam, nitazine, cocaine, and some heroin. Public safety notices are issued when new substances appear (such as medetomidine).

Andrea Thomas, Voices of Awareness and work group member, said her organization has evidence-based educational materials available to share with coroners for use during their interactions with schools. Voices of Awareness also works closely with law enforcement and supports impacted families and communities. She also asked if drug testing is conducted on children suffering an event possibly drug related. Dr. Lear said there are no standardized policies related to this practice; however, Children's Hospital does this type testing when required. Bob Fowler said EMS is required to report the presence of substances if they are called to a residence because of a sick child.

Andrea asked about the cause of death listed on death certificates. Bob Fowler said that he had observed only one incident the district attorney was able to prosecute since most individuals took drugs voluntarily.

Dr. Sanhu said providers can contact poison control for recommendations when they do not have access to a toxicologist. Children's Hospital has toxicologists on staff available for consultations.

Dep. Coroner Josephine Wallace, Morgan County: The county has a population of approximately 30,000 people. In the past three years, approximately 50% of overdose cases involved fentanyl, with the remainder involving mixed drug toxicity. The increase in education and the use of Narcan may be contributing to the recent decrease in overdoses. The county has also seen methamphetamine use in combination with alcohol and inhalants. Some of the decreases in overdose deaths may also be due to the fact that many cases are transported to larger hospitals in Denver, and deaths may be reported in that location.

Dr. Sanhu said that an adulterant (dexmedetomidine) has been added to the fentanyl supply in other parts of the country in order to prevent people from overdosing; however, this additive contributes to other issues that result in long periods of hospitalization.

Coroner comments regarding family interactions:

Dr. Lear: Most families know their loved ones are using fentanyl, even though the overdose deaths can still come as a surprise. Arapahoe County is hiring a family assistance liaison in March. Part of the job includes providing resources and support to family members.

Dr. Cannon: They encounter family members who do not know their family member is involved with drugs, which then becomes a huge part of the grieving process and often includes denial about the causes.

Bob Fowler: Individuals released from incarceration often become re-involved with other illicit drug users. He said most families are aware of drug use.

The availability of Narcan was discussed. Bob Fowler said teachers have an important role, and he has trained them to look for signs a student may be using drugs, i.e., behavioral patterns, changes in grades, certain friendships.

Dr. Sanhu said that adolescent overdose death data shows that many cases are recreational use of drugs where the individual thinks they are taking a benzodiazepine and are unaware the drug contains fentanyl. CDC data shows that two-thirds of deaths actually occur in the person's home. She noted that significantly more effective efforts are now underway to educate parents about Narcan and to ensure it is readily available in the home. She also reiterated the importance of educating children about drugs.

Bob Fuller also works with the health department. Meetings have discussed the necessity of starting drug education as early as kindergarten in order to educate children about adult substance use and Narcan.

Dr. Sanhu said she has had pediatric patients who have used Narcan on their parents or a caregiver. Some school districts are doing a better job of dispensing Narcan.

Dr. Cannon said the deaths she has seen are more prevalent among the adult population. She emphasized the importance of community connections and said she has visited businesses in the area to speak about Narcan. She is often accompanied by the Chief of Police. She also does educational outreach at the county building when individuals are exiting court appearances. Information about Narcan is available at a table set up just outside the court room. She will also be doing the same type of outreach at local libraries in Conifer and Stanley Lake. Dr. Cannon said she would welcome assistance with educational outreach efforts, particularly Narcan education.

Ally Arnaiz said Denver Public Library's central location has a standalone bookshelf with information about Narcan, recovery, and grief.

Hilary Bryant spoke about the Consortium's Keep the Party Safe social norming campaign designed to reach individuals using substances recreationally. The campaign addresses how to have a sober friend available when using substances, information about Narcan and how to use it, what overdoses look like, and how the Good Samaritan Law applies to overdose situations. Hilary asked the coroners about gaps that might exist in supporting families and how the Consortium might assist. She mentioned providing coroners with compassion cards for grieving families. Cards are available free of charge in both English and Spanish.

Dr. Lear said the Denver Coroner's office has a person on staff who follows up with families after an overdose death.

Bob Fowler said rural counties have very limited resources. Southeast Mental Health Services used to be on call in Otero County; however, they were taken over by Valley-wide Health. He now relies on the health department.

Dr. Russell-Kinsley said most families in El Paso County are referred to an opioid victim advocate through the Police Department. She said the compassion cards would be helpful.

For additional information regarding overdose data, both El Paso and Jefferson County publish reports on their websites. Reports cover the number of cases and the drugs involved. Both counties also have interactive dashboards with information listed by date and manner of death.

Jefferson County Coroner: jeffco.us/coroner

El Paso County Coroner: <https://coroner.elpasoco.com/>

Adjournment/next meeting date:

The meeting adjourned at 1:30 p.m. The next meeting will be held on Thursday, May 21, 2026 from 12 to 1:30 p.m. via Zoom

Attachment: Work group roster

Relevant links noted in Chat:

Compassion Cards (no charge): <https://corxconsortium.org/compassion-cards/>

Keep the Party Safe Campaign: <https://keepthepartysafe.org/>

The Connect Effect (partnership between the Colorado Attorney General's Office and Rise Above Colorado) including toolkit for parents and youth on how to discuss drugs:
<https://www.connecteffectco.org/youth>

Naloxone - Amazon (\$30 for two doses):

https://www.amazon.com/Padagis-Naloxone-HCl-Nasal-Spray/dp/B0CLT5H1TR/ref=sr_1_2_sspa?crid=S3U549OWVNLS&dib=eyJ2ljojMSJ9.XIBIYVU_gbvFzO2Fz2LX-mK48BMRq1xBYdGccslowUEVvcu9x1Rnr-NDbs0ygu6ExFsvEWhr8rT6_DRRI80vr9TF5FiBNZcrcFek4MVnjEaDrVb_U_bgKWMGVxdvo5Ui_d41Cj4ZbccNMMJokEwd-LdGEFRub8qEyAbv2cPR1XV4nEDaucJO5fMSoU68bEjkqzKqkQyedgBnrJ6VwJZI5OnPzOg7w-wUcqH0SRk6JLoya5KsxrACjHqNw3lqaKCGZJK0jFnkSRwN2szB5O-Tpol4ZtqBUmD8G-u8v2IaU4WQ.KGbMZGDo - OAKWEg Xxv3XomtJXFYits0HZLAaoFxFVI&dib_tag=se&keywords=naloxone&qid=1771531743&sprefix=nalox%2Caps%2C797&sr=8-2-spons&sp_csd=d2lkZ2V0TmFtZT1zcF9hdGY&psc=1

Naloxone - Walgreens: <https://www.walgreens.com/topic/pharmacy/naloxone.jsp>

Denver Family Advocate Support Team: <https://www.denvergov.org/Government/Agencies-Departments-Offices/Agencies-Departments-Offices-Directories/Public-Health-Environment/Medical-Examiner/Family-Advocate-Support-Team>

Denver Overdose Data Dashboard:

<https://denvergov.org/Government/Agencies-Departments-Offices/Agencies-Departments-Offices-Directories/Public-Health-Environment/Community-Behavioral-Health/Behavioral-Health-Support/Behavioral-Health-Initiatives/Overdose-Prevention/Overdose-Data-Dashboard>

Denver Public Library Resources (Narcan): <https://www.denverlibrary.org/social-services/resources#:~:text=Next%20Chapter%20Program,with%20no%20obligation%20to%20etu>

Jen Place comment: There is strong evidence for positive youth development (PYD) efforts and materials. The Truth Campaign is a renowned campaign example in the tobacco use prevention area: <https://truthinitiative.org/what-we-do/youth-smoking-prevention-education>

