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## PUBLIC LIBRARIES RESPOND TO THE OPIOID CRISIS WITH THEIR COMMUNITIES: CASE STUDIES

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# Case Study: Peoria Public Library

Through a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, OCLC and the Public Library Association have conducted research into how public libraries are supporting their communities through the opioid crisis, and how libraries are partnering with organizations to meet local needs. This profile was created through interviews with seven individuals: three staff members at the Peoria Public Library, two staff members at Human Service Center, a library board member, and one community member who participated in events at the library. Their thoughts and experiences may not be generalizable to all of the staff of the library or their partners.

*This is one of eight research-based case studies highlighting varying opioid response efforts across eight locations in the US. Additional information about the project can be found online at [oc.lc/opioid-crisis](https://oc.lc/opioid-crisis).*

## Community and Library Overview

Peoria Public Library (PPL) has a service population size of 115,007 and operates with one main and four branch locations. It has an operating budget of \$7,277,207 with 17.3 librarians and 64.88 other staff, totaling 82.18 personnel. The library reported over 712,000 visits per year.<sup>1</sup>

Peoria, Illinois, is roughly comprised of two-thirds White populations (60.8%), one-quarter Black or African American populations (26.5%), and about five percent (5.5%) Asian American populations. About one-third (34%) of its citizens hold a bachelor's degree, and 88% have at least a high school diploma.<sup>2</sup>

The median household income is \$47,697, and over one-fifth (20.9%) of its residents are living in poverty.<sup>3</sup> Peoria's unemployment rate is 5.3%<sup>4</sup>, and 7.2% of the population does not have health insurance.<sup>5</sup>

The main library location is in an area with a shortage of primary health care professionals.<sup>6</sup> Peoria County has an opioid prescribing rate of 69.2, which is the number of retail opioid prescriptions dispensed per 100 people. The number of general drug overdose deaths for Peoria County was 134 per 100,000 people during 2015 through 2017.<sup>7</sup>



**5 LIBRARY LOCATIONS**



**SERVICE POPULATION, 115,007**



**UNINSURED RATE, 7.2%**



**OPIOID PRESCRIBING RATE, 69.2  
(per 100 people)**



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“We want the library to be open to everyone. No matter where you are financially in life or what kinds of things you’re dealing with. The library is open, safe, and you’re welcome to come here. I think doing things like offering interventions through naloxone is reinforcing that because I want everybody to feel welcome here at the library.”

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—Peoria Public Library Executive Director

## Peoria Public Library’s Opioid Response

Peoria Public Library has implemented a multitude of opioid response activities in collaboration with community partners and the Mayor’s Community Coalition Against Heroin.

### COMMUNITY EVENTS

The library serves on the Mayor’s Community Coalition Against Heroin. One of the largest events produced by the coalition was hosting Sam Quinones, the well-known author of *Dreamland*, which chronicles America’s opioid epidemic. This book was selected as the focus for the annual One City, One Book project where everyone in the community is encouraged to read the same book, discuss it together, and participate in associated programming.

The coalition received money via the city to host the author and purchase 500 books for the library to give out for free to the community. Leading up to the author’s visit, the coalition hosted community forums discussing opioids, as well as viewings of the film, *Chasing the Dragon: The Life of an Opiate Addict*<sup>8</sup>, which focuses on the dangers of substance use disorder.

The library also provided a local private Catholic high school with 70 copies of *Dreamland* so their 11th and 12th grade students from Human Body’s Systems, American Legal Issues, and Advance Placement Psychology courses could study the topic. Nurses from the local university and members of the coalition,

including the mayor, the state’s attorney, and president of OSF HealthCare, spoke to the classes about the book.

In addition to presenting at an evening discussion at the library, Quinones also participated in a local radio talk show interview, met with coalition members and elected officials, visited Peoria Public Schools to meet with department heads and managers, and visited the county jail and met with the sheriff. Following the author’s visit, Peoria Public Library decided to expand their efforts and received funding from Illinois Humanities to host four community discussions on heroin and opiates at different library locations.

Bradley University’s Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, which provides continuing education for people over the age of 50, contacted PPL to inquire about offering a course addressing heroin and opiates. The library worked in partnership with the institute to develop the curriculum, which resulted in a six-week, 12-hour course in which different community leaders presented on topics at each class.

For example, one class featured the mayor, the state’s attorney, the police chief, a police captain, and a person in recovery discussing how the opioid epidemic is manifesting itself in Peoria. Another session included a presentation by a local mother about her experience with her son’s struggle with addiction and eventual fatal overdose, followed by a discussion facilitated by the President and CEO of the Human Service Center about what can be done to address the opioid problem. The course was very successful and was repeated one year later.

Today, the library is working to publicly share information about substance use and opioid overdose prevention by hosting relevant content on their website that shares news of the coalition’s activities, highlights resources available in the community for people struggling with substance use disorder, and provides a link to the Illinois Addiction Hotline. Posters and bookmarks are available in the library with information about the Hotline, and the library has displayed addiction awareness materials at the check-out desk in the past.

### NALOXONE TRAINING FOR THE STAFF

At one of the community discussions, a nurse educator offered to teach library staff how to administer naloxone, the opioid overdose reversal drug. Three days prior to this scheduled optional training, an opioid overdose occurred at the library, which prompted staff to sign up for the training after experiencing the epidemic in such proximity.

The training included information on the benefits of naloxone, how it works, and information about opioid addiction. Training was offered to the staff again one year later by the Human Service Center, and now the library has both nasal and injectable naloxone on-site for administration (also provided by the Human Service Center).



Overdose Rescue Kit.  
Photo courtesy of Peoria Public Library

## Partnering for Success

The initial opioid response work that the library engaged in grew out of the mayor’s coalition and those immediate connections. Following this, the majority of the library’s partnerships grew organically from each opioid response activity. If a new partner was needed, PPL could easily reach out, share information about what they were doing, and request help.

The library sees that one of the valuable aspects of the partnerships is their partners’ assistance with promoting the work of the library. For example, an article on the front page of the local paper quoting the mayor and the coalition outlined the problem and began to raise awareness of the issue. The Human Service Center expanded on this effort by promoting the library’s naloxone trainings on their website, flyers, and social media pages.

The range of opioid response activities allows PPL to engage with a wide range of community partners including: the City of Peoria, the mayor, the state’s attorney, OSF Healthcare, the Human Service Center, Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, the police department, and Illinois Humanities.

## Local Conditions Leading Up to the Library’s Response

Many local factors and conditions led to PPL’s response to the opioid crisis with their community partners, including:

- formation of the Mayor’s Community Coalition Against Heroin
- drug use occurring at the library
- increase in severity and use of opioids in the community
- library leadership’s desire to address the opioid epidemic

The mayor of Peoria regularly meets with the state’s attorney and chief of police to

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“There is a shared interest in helping people in our community not overdose or die from heroin and opiates. Public libraries have good reputations. We’re not trying to compete with anybody else. So people say yes. The library can be a good matchmaker or connection maker.”

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—Peoria Public Library Board Member

discuss significant events occurring within the community. As they discussed the rise of overdoses, the mayor decided to form the Mayor’s Community Coalition Against Heroin, and the library was invited to join the effort. The library’s opioid response activities grew out of their involvement with this initiative.

During the early stages of the library’s response activities, an individual overdosed in the library. Additionally, the overall number of overdoses and the availability of street drugs increased in the community, both of which signaled a need to address the growing opioid epidemic.

When the library was invited to join the coalition, a member of the library’s leadership team expressed interest in being the primary contact and led the library’s work on this issue. Community partners highlight the drive and vision of this staff member as one of the key factors to PPL’s successful community engagement. One community partner described how the library manager explained the library’s place in the community, “When [we] met, she talked about how she saw the role of the library being more than a building with books in it that people came to, but to [a place to] help facilitate community education.”

## Reactions and Experiences of Library Staff, Board, and Community Members

Overall, the reactions and experiences of PPL staff, their community partners, the media,

and impacted community members have been positive and supportive of PPL’s opioid response activities.

### LIBRARY STAFF AND BOARD

There has been no resistance from library staff, which is partly because the naloxone training has been optional. The board of the library is also supportive of the staff, expressed no concerns with the opioid response activities, and sees the value of the efforts. A library board member shared, “I think now we see ourselves as proactive, an expanded role that goes beyond offering literacy and learning and those kinds of opportunities that you traditionally associate with a library. We want to see ourselves growing and expanding and evolving to meet the community’s needs.”

### MEDIA

The media has been involved in the community’s broad opioid response activities since the inception. For example, the mayor called together the local newspaper, radio, and public radio, when he announced the coalition. The media also promoted the library’s community education programs and naloxone training. Recently, the *U.S. News & World Report*<sup>9</sup> featured PPL’s opioid response efforts. The media’s coverage of the activities has been supportive, but it was also noted that additional coverage could be beneficial, to help raise awareness about specific activities and events.

### COMMUNITY PARTNER

Community partners have been immensely supportive of the library’s engagement with the opioid crisis. These partners frequently contact the staff of the library to present at various





Materials available to distribute to the public on receiving support while in crisis.  
 Photo courtesy of Peoria Public Library

events and community activities, and the library can equally call on their partners and important community leaders to engage in library events. Partners also described the value of working with the library on this issue, “I think the library is setting a standard that the conversation about opioids is allowable and approachable.”

### COMMUNITY MEMBERS

The community’s response to PPL’s opioid work has been mixed, largely due to the stigma and a need for broader education around substance use disorder. Some patrons who attended the community discussion sessions voiced concerns that people with substance use disorder should not be helped, and that naloxone should not be given out for free when other pharmaceuticals are not. In contrast, there are patrons who have attended multiple events at the library and have found themselves reconnecting with the library and advocating for others to attend.

## Outcomes of the Library’s Response

Many positive outcomes have occurred as a result of PPL’s opioid programming. PPL recently started to track outcome measures with informal surveys of the community discussions, but this data is not yet available. At the time of this report, three overdoses have been successfully

addressed in the library, and 500 copies of *Dreamland*<sup>10</sup> have been distributed.

The coalition community forums garnered around 60 participants, while the daytime author event had 30–40 participants, and the evening event had 60–75 attendees. As described above, PPL has been invited on multiple occasions to present on their work at various venues, including to other libraries in the area, which resulted in more community education events. Overall, the library has received a lot of positive recognition for their opioid work.

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“It has been really cool for me in my own journey of having the chance to tell my story, build positive relationships with my community, and hopefully find an opportunity for somebody to learn something from my mistakes. I know for my growth, little things like that have just bolstered my foundation, my support, my peer network, my positive behavior.”

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—Peoria Public Library Community Member

In addition, PPL’s opioid response activities reached new populations in the community as many of the program participants were new visitors to the library. Moreover, there

was intermingling of varying groups of populations because of large variations of the socioeconomic classes of the participants.

Staff from PPL have presented on their activities at the Illinois Library Association conference. As a result of this presentation, directors of other public libraries reached out with requests for PPL to present to their staff on their opioid response activities and how they were implemented. PPL staff also spoke at an opioid listening tour that the Illinois Lieutenant Governor hosted, illustrating why the library is a part of the opioid prevention strategy and advocating for all public libraries to be involved in their community to increase accessibility of opioid and substance use information and resources.

The following factors contributed to the success of PPL's opioid response activities:

- They engaged partners with a vested interest in improving the community.
- They had an internal champion and community leaders to drive the work forward.
- There was political support from the mayor's office.
- The mayor's coalition was financially supported by a variety of sources.

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"All of us have collaborated from the top down to evolve our facilities from uniquely a place where someone would come to read, to being what could be more accurately considered community centers. That implies a safe haven. Certainly, it's a place of books but also a place where we can have discussions to show we're open to every issue whether it's a celebration or a challenge that our community would face. We want to welcome everyone with open arms, most especially when the topic has serious implications."

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—Peoria Public Library Board Member

## Challenges, Needs, and Opportunities

Through the course of developing and implementing their opioid response activities, PPL experienced challenges, needs, and identified opportunities for the work moving forward.

### CHALLENGES AND NEEDS

- The library is working with high-level personnel such as the mayor and state's attorney so scheduling a coordinated community event can prove difficult.
- Money and support to garner big-name speakers can be challenging for the library to fund independently so they often rely on requesting funding together with partners, particularly because the state of Illinois has experienced a decline in public funding.
- Funding needs to be directed toward measuring the impact of the community's opioid response activities.
- There is stigma against individuals with substance use disorder in the community.

The drug challenges keep evolving and proving difficult to address. For example, the opioid epidemic is more than opioid addiction. This has evolved into heroin, fentanyl, and methamphetamine substance use disorder, which results in a greater number of overdoses and deaths, and an increasing need for additional resources to address the related issues.

### OPPORTUNITIES AND LESSONS LEARNED

The following are ongoing and future needs to support efforts to best address the opioid crisis:

- **Form partnerships**, which are critical to implementing community-based work because each organization knows their niche area and populations served.

- **Outreach** to the organizations and people already working to address the issue in the community builds credibility when more than one voice advocates for change.
- **Step outside your comfort zone** to see what helps the community and be open to trying new strategies and approaches.
- **Be prepared for public recognition** if you begin to lead in offering non-traditional library services.
- **Provide regular staff training on naloxone** to keep staff current on signs and symptoms of substance use disorder and overdose.
- Start with increasing the level of **knowledge in the community** about an issue before asking community members to change their opinions or advocate for change.
- **Foster a safe and welcoming environment** in the community so vulnerable individuals feel secure coming forward for help, and provide information to patrons on accessing social services, such as treatment centers, safe housing, and food services.

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The views, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this case study do not necessarily represent those of the Institute of Museum and Library Services.



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## NOTES

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