



Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA)-Supported
Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Abuse Program (COSSAP)
**Successful Strategies for Addressing the Opioid
Epidemic in Rural Communities: Engaging With
Faith-Based Organizations**

The **Rural Responses to the Opioid Epidemic (RROE) project**, co-funded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the State Justice Institute, supports 21 rural sites across the country to develop or enhance efforts to strengthen epidemiologic surveillance and public health data infrastructure; implement effective community-level opioid overdose prevention activities; and establish or enhance public safety, public health, and behavioral health collaborations. Sites may also expand peer recovery and recovery support services that help people start and stay in recovery.

Learn more about the RROE project at <https://rural.cossapresources.org/>.

More than 84 percent of scientific studies show that faith is a positive factor in addiction prevention and recovery. More than 20,000 lives are saved every year because of faith-based programs that are in or affiliated with churches.¹

Rural communities in all areas of the country are reaching out to their churches and faith-based

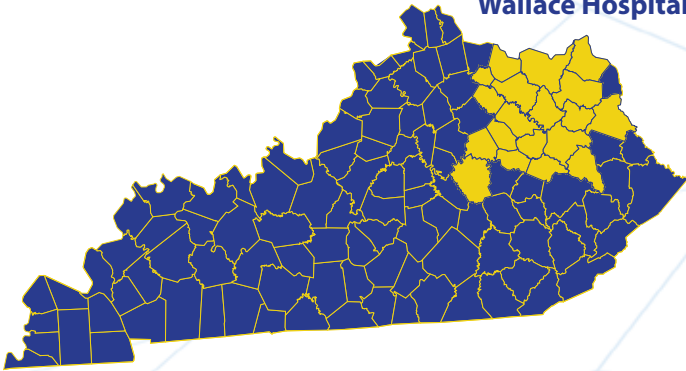
organizations to bring them on as important partners and expand upon their outreach initiatives, as well as utilize the built-in resources many churches have, such as food pantries, clothing drives, and childcare services. This brief is one in a series highlighting projects that are part of the RROE project.

¹ "Belief, Behavior, and Belonging: How Faith is Indispensable in Preventing and Recovering from Substance Abuse" a 2019 study by Brian J. Grim (Baylor University) and Melissa E. Grim (Religious Freedom & Business Foundation), published in the peer-reviewed Journal of Religion and Health.

Topics in *Successful Strategies for Addressing the Opioid Epidemic in Rural Communities* Series

- Engaging With Faith-Based Organizations
- Law Enforcement- and First Responder-Led Diversion Programs
- Engaging the Local Business Community
- Youth and Families Prevention and Intervention
- Harm Reduction
- Transportation
- Response Teams
- Jail-Based Programming

Marcum and Wallace Hospital



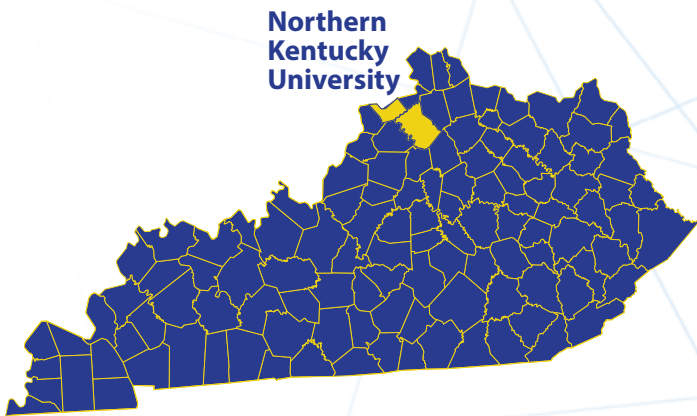
Marcum and Wallace Hospital

[Marcum and Wallace Hospital \(Marcum and Wallace\)](#) services 21 counties in eastern Kentucky that have a combined population of approximately 406,000. Within these counties, the age-adjusted death rate due to drug overdose is 30.89 deaths per 100,000 people. Several of the targeted counties have much higher death rates, with Powell County, Kentucky, at 47.51, Mason County, Kentucky, at 42.07, and Estill County, Kentucky, at 52.15. One main component of the work Marcum and Wallace is doing with its partners is establishing quick response teams (QRTs) in four counties. QRTs make contact with individuals and families who have experienced overdose to offer support and connections to services and treatment. To learn more about QRTs, visit [Successful Strategies for Addressing the Opioid Epidemic in Rural Communities: Community Outreach and Response Teams](#).

The Estill County QRT is made up of several people representing the public health and criminal justice spheres, including a peer support specialist, a licensed clinical professional, an emergency medical services director, and the Estill County sheriff.

However, there is a component that makes their QRT unique. One of their core members, Brett Benton, is a chaplain. Together, the team receives a referral, contacts the individual needing help, and responds with services within 24 hours of receiving notification of an overdose. Benton's role is an integral part of the team in providing spiritual support to everyone involved in active addiction situations. Benton is able to lend an empathetic ear to individuals with substance use disorder (SUD) and to family members who are dealing with loved ones in active addiction.

Addiction is often a multifaceted issue, and Benton is able to assist in getting clients emotional and spiritual help that may be needed. Benton described a recent interaction while giving a client a ride to pick up some things before checking in to a treatment facility, "He kept bringing up relationship issues and mental health issues (which is why I firmly believe addiction is far more than just a substance issue), and so, I was able to open up and really connect with the client based on some experiences I had." Benton continued, "This discussion led to being able to discuss Celebrate Recovery, which is a faith-based, 12-step program that I am currently involved in . . . [We are] using spiritual support alongside peer support in the QRT. It is something I am very honored to be a part of."



Northern Kentucky University

[Northern Kentucky University \(NKU\)](#) has a service area in two of the eight counties that comprise the Northern Kentucky region. Carroll and Owen counties in Kentucky have a combined population of approximately 21,400 people. From 2019 to 2020, there was at least a 60 percent increase in non-fatal opioid overdoses. Opioid-related emergency department visits increased by 38.1 percent from January 2017 through March 2021, increasing 13.9 percent in the 6 months from October 2020 to March 2021. Northern Kentucky had an accidental poisoning death rate of 32 per 100,000 people in 2019 and 2020. More than half of all arrests in Carroll and Owen counties are drug-related, and a recent national analysis showed that the Northern Kentucky region has the highest relative risk of SUD-related mortality at a national level. Counties within this hotspot had a risk of SUD-related death between 2.5 to 5.6 times higher compared to the rest of the country. Youth-centered outreach and prevention activities are the focuses of NKU's RROE project. Engaging faith leaders in this work is pivotal for program success.

With Kentucky having the third-highest rate of increase for overdose deaths in the country in 2020, RROE project coordinators began to ask about how to combat the problem. "We can unite," says Tammy Barrett Wolcott, the drug prevention coordinator for NKU. "Unification of resources and referrals can literally save people's lives right now, and one of the greatest resources every community has is its faith-based community and faith-based organizations. Those churches are such an asset to you [in the field] right now," says Wolcott.

NKU started with five local churches, all with different levels of community support and different denominations. Once the churches were on board, they were supplied with prevention first training, Narcan training, and Narcan, and they were given information about how to access care and treatment in the community. Faith leaders joined with schools, medical providers, and local businesses for collaboration efforts. "Our faith-based community is one of our largest outreach [partners]. They reach all ends of the county on so many different levels," says Wolcott. This initial collaboration led to growth and established a coalition of churches and organizations that includes 54 percent of the churches in the area as of February 2022.

Lessons Learned

Churches often have built-in resources for and connections to individuals in need. Many churches are already involved in their own community outreach and can extend those services to individuals with SUD, including food, clothing, and even childcare services. Similarly, if individuals are coming to a church as a trusted resource for these services, they may also be more willing to access SUD treatment or supports if the church provides information about or connection to providers.

Staffing trouble? Churches can help. Faith-based volunteers contribute \$316 billion in savings that are at no cost to taxpayers and private organizations.

Church can be community, not just religion. “Once a family is touched by a church, that brings them in and makes them part of a community,” says Wolcott. “Some of these families end up in the church, some of them do not, but they all get touched in a positive way. It is so much bigger than just the church itself.”

Visit the COSSAP Resource Center at www.cossapresources.org.

About BJA

The Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) provides leadership and services in grant administration and criminal justice policy development to support local, state, and tribal law enforcement in achieving safer communities. To learn more about BJA, visit www.bja.gov and follow us on Facebook (www.facebook.com/DOJBJA) and Twitter (@DOJBJA). BJA is part of the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Justice Programs.

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