

Law enforcement and criminal justice professionals' knowledge and attitudes towards medication assisted treatment for opioid use disorder in rural communities

Alexis Hunter^{1,2}
John M Westfall¹
Kristen Curcija¹
Linda Zittleman¹

¹University of Colorado School of Medicine

²High Plains Research Network Community Advisory Council

*COMIRB NO.: 16-1415

*No conflicts of interest.

Abstract

Context: There is a lack of medication assisted treatment (MAT) in prisons and jails for opioid use disorder (OUD), despite leading health organizations' recommendations.

Drug overdose death rate in individuals released from jail is three- to eightfold that the general population. Objective: As part of the Implementing Technology and Medication Assisted Treatment Team Training in Rural Colorado project (IT MATTTRs), explore rural law enforcement and criminal justice system professionals' knowledge and beliefs related to OUD and MAT and perceived barriers to MAT in jail and prison settings.

Study Design: Descriptive study using cross-sectional quantitative survey data and qualitative data using key informant interviews. Setting: 16 rural counties in the High Plains Research Network in (eastern Colorado). Population: Sheriffs, county and district court judges, police chiefs, probation officers, and staff. Outcome Measures: Perception of problem of OUD in community, knowledge of OUD and MAT with buprenorphine, awareness of MAT-related policy and procedures, and provision of and barriers to MAT in local jail. Results: Surveys were completed by 45 respondents (71% response rate). Of these, 66% reported that opioid pain medication abuse is a serious problem within their community. However, 52% reported not knowing if MAT with buprenorphine helps reduce crime and re-incarceration, 49% did not know if screening for OUD occurs in the judicial system, and 32% did not know if MAT with buprenorphine is available in the local jail. While 77% have referred or would consider referring people with OUD for MAT, only 35% know where to refer people for MAT with buprenorphine. Common perceived barriers to MAT in jails and prisons included lack of local providers and insufficient funding. KI interviews were conducted with 13 criminal justice system

professionals. Regional variation in frequency of contact with people with opioid use disorder was found. There were positive opinions regarding MAT with some worries around funding and substituting one medication for another. Conclusions: This study helps identify challenges and opportunities for partnerships between the law enforcement, criminal justice system, and health professionals in rural, underserved communities. A thorough understanding of the neurobiology of opioid dependence and addiction and MAT coupled with improved communication with health care providers may strengthen criminal justice system professionals' role in combating OUD in rural communities.