



Your Voice Ohio: Confronting the Addiction Crisis

Challenge The opioid epidemic has affected the health, social, and economic welfare of almost every state. Ohio suffers the second-highest unintentional opioid-overdose death rate per 100,000 in the United States, as more than 4,000 people die each year. Despite the heavy loss of life, media coverage illuminating productive and community-oriented solutions was difficult to find. Traditional journalism tended to prioritize conflict, statistics and deaths rather than provide information on solutions. The community, yearning for these solutions, became numb to the reporting, if not hostile. Mark Sweetwood, Managing Editor of the Youngstown Vindicator, exemplifies the desire to try a new approach:

“You can do story after story after story, but eventually you get to the point, what else can we do? There must be something we can do other than just report on the story. How can we take the words, and the pictures, and the stories we put together and get other people involved?”

Partners and Funders Democracy Fund and the Knight Foundation provide funding for Your Voice Ohio. Partners include Journalism that Matters, Hearken, and 53 (and growing) television, radio, online and print news outlets. The Jefferson Center, a non-partisan community engagement and policy nonprofit, secures the funding, designs the engagement events and manages day-to-day operations.

The Your Voice Ohio Advisory Board consists of leading journalists, researchers, and engagement practitioners, helping ensure the project is aligned with emerging best practices for community engagement and journalism based on work around the world.

Solution-Focused Design Beginning with the premise that people are searching for help, Your Voice Ohio worked with competing news outlets to jointly hold community meetings in which journalists participated with citizens to discuss what was known about the crisis and to hear ideas on solutions. A series of 14 sessions in a variety of communities elicited deep reflection from multiple perspectives and identified potential solutions. Journalists shared their observations after each session and often detected wide gaps between public needs and solutions offered by policy makers.

Project Snapshot



Location:
Across Ohio



Scope:
Community level



Timeline:
October 2017 - July 2018



Number of participants:
+600



Targeted participants:
Ohioans



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Deliberation Process From October 2017 to July 2018, we hosted fourteen public conversations across Ohio (Mahoning Valley, Miami Valley, Central Ohio, Mid-Ohio Valley). At each event, journalists sat with dozens of community members — folks in recovery, families who have lost a child or sibling to overdose, public health officials, elected officials, and others — to ask and answer three key questions:

*What does the opioid epidemic look like in our community?
What do we see as causes of the epidemic in our community?
What steps might we take to combat the opioid epidemic?*

Based on feedback from the first few events, we changed the framing of the questions from “opioid epidemic” to “addiction crisis” to reflect beliefs that opioid deaths were a symptom of a much larger problem. Participants shared their unique experiences, knowledge, and ideas with one another, deepening the community’s understanding of the crisis. At the end of each discussion, we asked participants to write one question about the crisis they wanted a journalist to answer. Media partners and researchers split the questions and shared answers quickly to show citizens that journalists were listening. Reporters also began digging more deeply into the impacts, causes, and potential solutions that the community had identified.

In addition to our in-person deliberative processes, we also gave people opportunities to engage digitally. Using Hearken, a digital journalism engagement tool, Ohioans were able to ask questions they would like us to explore and/or vote on an existing question they would like to see answered. Ohioans are also able to share their personal stories on how the addiction epidemic has impacted their lives, and those who share can remain anonymous if they wish.

Outcomes When we asked people “what does the opioid epidemic look like in your community?” a clear feeling of hopelessness emerged. They universally agreed that addiction is non-discriminate and catastrophic. In nearly every community, people shared experiences about loss and involvement in crime and most importantly, inadequate resources.

When asked what people saw as causes of the epidemic, they discussed a variety of subjects: ease of access, lack of economic opportunities, ineffective and unaffordable recovery programs, revolving doors of the judicial system, pharmaceuticals, social stigma, and many more.

When we asked people what they saw as potential solutions to combat the epidemic, their responses, again, covered many issues: success stories that illustrate recovery is possible, youth education, drug courts, longer treatments, and more.

As citizens answered the questions raised by the media collaborative, they raised many new questions for journalists. They prompted new research into public services, analysis of data and changes in coverage. Media experienced the benefits of collaboration: rather than duplicate work, they worked together to provide better solutions-oriented content suitable for multiple platforms. They also re-defined their ideas of holding officials accountable and the value of “experts.” Citizens saw themselves as having a role in community problem-solving as a result of coverage of their deliberations. Discussions resulted in better understanding, shared ideas for solutions and in some cases change with the potential for improved health, safety, and well-being of all Ohioans.



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Shifting Coverage

Feedback from the community conversations and research led to a shift in the traditional media coverage of addiction across Ohio, including:

- Destigmatizing the language around addiction (i.e. swapping out words like “addict” and “junkie” for terms like “substance use disorder”).
- Framing the epidemic as a “health crisis” rather than a “crime crisis”.
- Avoiding the use of images that could act as a trigger to those battling with addiction (i.e. Syringes as cover photos).
- Compiling and distributing resources for people struggling with substance dependency, families of people struggling with addiction, concerned members of the community, employers, and healthcare professionals:
 - [How To Get Help: An Opioid Addiction Resource Guide](#), WYSO
 - [Recovery group to connect locals with addiction resources](#), Williamson Daily News
 - [Where can people turn when loved ones need help?](#), Your Voice Ohio
 - [Resources for those battling with addiction](#), WKYC3
 - [Support for families of those addicted](#), WFMJ 21
 - [Exploring employment resources for people in recovery](#), Your Voice Ohio
- Putting audience engagement at the forefront and working to quickly and accurately answer the questions received from members of the community about addiction:
 - [Community questions media’s opioid coverage](#), Tribune Chronicle
 - [How does addiction work?](#), Your Voice Ohio
 - [Can Providing Addicts With Needles Help Curb The Opioid Crisis and the Costly Epidemic to Follow?](#), WKSU
 - [What is the role of pharmaceutical companies in the crisis?](#), Your Voice Ohio
 - [Should health agencies in the Mahoning Valley give needles to addicts?](#), The Vindicator
- Highlighting and exploring the impacts of potential solutions to combat the addiction epidemic:
 - [Drug crisis in Ohio: What solutions are making a difference?](#), Dayton Daily News
 - [Potential solutions to the opioid epidemic](#), WFMJ 21
 - [Sheriff’s department to launch overdose quick-response team](#), The Vindicator
 - [#MyOpioidPledge: How a Dayton hospital network is trying to get personal to battle overdoses](#), Dayton Daily News
- Collecting, analyzing, and sharing data in order to better comprehend the extent of the epidemic and what could be done about it:
 - [Measuring the Impact of Opiate Addiction in Ohio](#), WKSU
 - [Exploring the Data behind the Opioid Epidemic](#), Your Voice Ohio
 - [Weighing costs of drug abuse prevention vs. treatment](#), The Vindicator
 - [The Cost of an Epidemic](#), Your Voice Ohio
 - [How Can Ohio Cities Step Up Their Response To Overdoses? Make The Data Public](#), WVXU
- Reporting on the outcomes from each community forum to show that we are listening and understand the unique needs of each community, and to bring awareness to other members of the community about how their neighbors feel:
 - [Fighting the heroin crisis together](#), Tribune Chronicle
 - [The Middletown community talked honestly last night about the human costs of the opioid epidemic](#), Journal-News
 - [Community advises more coping skills needed to combat addiction](#), Newark Advocate
 - [Forum: Solutions to Ohio opioid crisis should be ‘self-sustaining, repeatable’](#), Dayton Daily News
 - [Your voice, everyone’s crisis: Citizens share perceptions, concerns at opioids forum](#), News Journal
 - [Community urged to support addicts, saying it ‘looks like anybody’](#), Marion Star



“ I think it was awesome that we had a chance to ask the questions and look for solutions and have it be a community effort. We should do this more often. Recovery matters and we do have the ability to be part of the solution as a community.

-Patrice Pooler, Executive Director/CEO of the Mid-Ohio Valley Fellowship Home

Recovery doesn't have a face or a name. It looks like anybody and everybody.

-Addiction Crisis in Marion Attendee

We were really participants in the sessions, rather than observers. I think it let people know that we are part of the community too and we do care about this. We live in this time when people aren't super trustful of journalists and it was a really good engagement thing to do to sit at tables with them.

-Jordyn Grzelewski, journalist

Interested in hosting a dialogue in your community? Contact us to learn more about collaborating:

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