

Understanding harm reduction: Addressing common concerns

Harm reduction empowers people who use drugs to prevent overdoses and reduce other negative consequences connected to drug use — for themselves and their communities. Harm reduction strategies are effective and compassionate, taking into account the complexities of drug use and the humanity of each person who uses drugs. For organizations that are new to harm reduction, there are often questions about the work. Below are answers to the more common concerns.

Does harm reduction encourage drug use?

Harm reduction gives people information and tools to protect their health and the health of their community. There is no evidence that harm reduction programs result in more drug use or increase the number of people using drugs. In fact, studies have shown that people who use syringe service programs are three times more likely to stop using drugs.

Should abstinence from drugs always be the goal?

While abstinence may be the goal of some people who use drugs, for others it may not. Harm reduction provides immediate, life-saving resources, meeting people where they are and supporting their agency in preventing overdoses and adopting safer practices. Together with prevention, treatment and recovery support, harm reduction ensures every entry point to health and services remains open.

Do harm reduction supplies result in unsafe neighborhoods and community spaces?

Community safety is a core priority of this work. The community is safer when we reduce the risks of disease and overdose. In addition to safer use supplies, the Clearinghouse provides wound care supplies, hand sanitizer, and personal sharps boxes. Every organization that participates in this program is required to have a plan for safe sharps disposal if they plan to distribute new needles. All communities can benefit from more tools and support, leading to safer and healthier communities.

Does harm reduction get in the way of recovery?

Many of the organizations that provide harm reduction services also provide other essential services such as medical care and recovery support. Because of this, harm reduction often brings together people who use drugs with people who can support them with recovery when they are ready. It is another entry point for health and healing.

Is harm reduction new?

Across the United States and around the world, harm reduction has been in use for decades. In Oregon, organizations have been practicing harm reduction since at least the 1980s, when Outside In opened the state's first syringe exchange. Now, thanks to decades of grassroots activism and a growing movement of people and organizations, harm reduction is saving lives and supporting healthy communities across the state and throughout Indian Country.

Should funding for harm reduction services go toward other services instead?

Harm reduction programs are proven to prevent infection and save lives. Research shows that harm reduction programs can reduce HIV and HCV infection rates by 50 percent. And when bystanders are trained to administer naloxone for opioid overdoses, survival rates increase to 83% or more. At as little as \$20 per dose, naloxone is not only compassionate and life-saving, it's cost-effective, too. All this makes harm reduction a critical element for supporting hope, healing and health — and a worthwhile use of funds.