



Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA)-Supported
Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Abuse Program (COSSAP)
**Successful Strategies for Addressing the Opioid
Epidemic in Rural Communities: Youth and Families
Prevention and Intervention**

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/>.

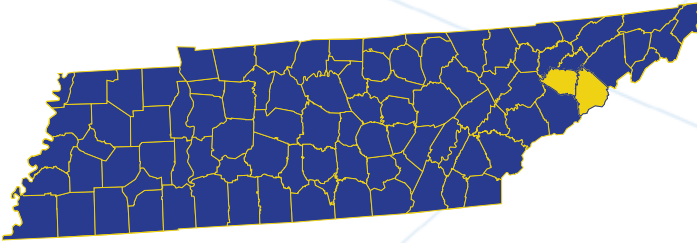
One in eight children ages 17 or younger are living in homes with at least one parent who has substance use disorder (SUD), according to the National Center on Substance Abuse and Child Welfare. Services for children that address their medical and developmental needs and experiences of trauma, reestablish trusting bonds with their families, and ensure that family members are supported as well are critical.

Rural communities across the country are identifying ways to effectively implement youth- and family-focused programs to better serve individuals directly affected by SUD. This brief is one in a series highlighting projects that are part of the RROE project.

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

WestCare Tennessee, Inc.



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[WestCare Tennessee, Inc. \(WestCare\)](#) is a nonprofit organization located in 16 states and 3 U.S. territories. For its RROE project, WestCare serves two northeast counties in Tennessee—Cocke and Jefferson—located 30 minutes east of Pigeon Forge and Gatlinburg, with a population of roughly 47,300 people. In 2017, the overdose death rate in Cocke County was 47 per 100,000 people and 21 per 100,000 in Jefferson County as a whole. The overdose death rate in Cocke County is more than double the national rate, with 15 overdose deaths in 2017 (up from 5 in 2016), 94 nonfatal overdose outpatient hospital visits, and 53 inpatient stays. The rate of opioid prescriptions in Cocke County for 2018 was 1563 per 1000 persons. In Jefferson County, drug overdose deaths doubled in 2017, with an additional 114 nonfatal overdose outpatient hospital visits and 48 nonfatal inpatient stays. The prescribing rate for opioids in Jefferson County in 2018 was 1099 per 1000 persons.

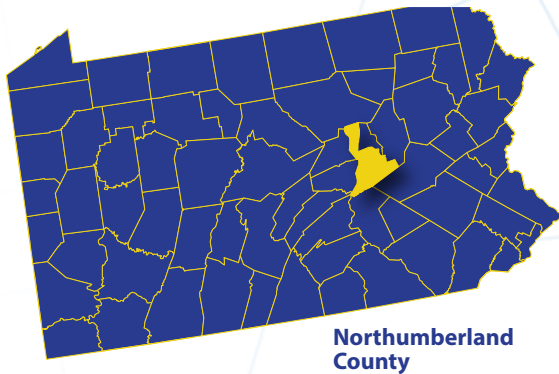
When WestCare’s RROE team was discussing plans for implementation, Shandi Hill, the WestCare RROE project coordinator, realized youth were not being considered as part of that conversation. “Why?” she asked. “When we were thinking of justice-involved [individuals], it should also include their families . . . It should also include their youth.” Once youth were factored into the program as a priority, four youth-centered products and collaborations were

determined to be a good fit for their community’s needs.

WestCare was able to establish two valuable partnerships, one with children’s book author, Trish Luna, who wrote the book *Timbi Talks About Addiction*, and one with the Tennessee Alliance for Drug Endangered Children (TADEC). TADEC Statewide Coordinator Tabatha Curtis and Luna were able to make a trip to the area to co-lead trainings for first responders and community leaders on a variety of topics. Luna spoke on the validation of youth’s feelings toward family members with SUD, and Curtis provided training on TADEC’s efforts to implement a proactive approach to address the needs of Tennessee children to prevent exposure to the drug epidemic and human trafficking. Luna also did a public reading of *Timbi Talks About Addiction*, which was very successful. Four hundred copies of the book have been disseminated in the community. TADEC then invited WestCare to present at the TADEC convening to share about their youth-focused efforts in August 2021.

One of WestCare’s youth-focused activities is offering Botvin LifeSkills Training, an evidence-based program that provides a comprehensive substance misuse and violence prevention curriculum to upper elementary through high school-aged students and their parents via a local elementary school and local Boys & Girls Club. “This curriculum helps increase self-esteem for youth. It also helps develop healthy attitudes and improve knowledge of essential life skills—all of which promote healthy and positive personal development,” says Hill. Finally, WestCare implemented Camp Mariposa, a free addiction-prevention and mentoring program for children aged 9 to 12 years that are affected by substance misuse. The overnight weekend camps are held every other month, six times a year. In between camp months, families are invited to family fun days six times per

year to allow for family members to engage with their children in ways they typically might not. The purpose of the camp is to reduce the feeling of isolation and connect children with others that live in similar situations. To date, 20 youth have been involved in the camp.



Northumberland County

[Northumberland County \(Northumberland\)](#) is located in central Pennsylvania, 1 hour north of the state capital of Harrisburg. The county covers a 478-square-mile area with a population of approximately 93,900 and roughly 38,000 households with school-aged children. The year 2019 saw the deadliest year on record for opioid-related deaths in the county at 45 known fatalities. From 2020 to 2021, there was a slight decrease in overdose fatalities each year, with 70 deaths combined.

Northumberland's youth-focused initiative expands upon an already-existing school-based prevention activity, the Strengthening Families Program (SFP 10–14), to five additional school districts in the project area. SFP is an internationally recognized, evidence-based family skills training program that brings parents/guardians and youth aged 10 to 14 years old together in a learning environment. Families attend weekly SFP skills classes where they have separate class training for parents and youth in the first hour, followed by a joint-family practice session in the second hour. The program is used to strengthen family communication, promote academic

success, and prevent violence and aggressive behavior. "Being able to implement this program has been so rewarding and has brought our community together," says Christin Hughes, a social worker and SFP coordinator at Shamokin Area Middle/High School. "To say that Strengthening Families Program has changed my life as a coordinator is an understatement. I have seen so many community members come together to make this the most successful cohort we could have imagined," says Hughes.

Two of the schools were able to begin the programs at the original start date without COVID-19 setbacks, and 16 families graduated from the program. COVID-19 interrupted one 2021 program session for nine families, which is on track to restart in fall 2022. To date, three trainings were held with RROE funding for school district staff and community members, and currently, all six public school districts in the county have staff members and community members trained in the SFP program and hope to move forward with the program sessions in 2022 to 2023.

Northumberland has also established a partnership with the county's Children and Youth Services agency and the local United Way and works with their safe care manager, a position like no other in the state, which was created to help decrease the workload for case workers in the area. With a change in mandated reporter laws in 2015 and child protective services law in 2016, reported child abuse cases rose by 50 percent, and babies born to mothers with SUD who have documented substance exposure are required to have a safe care plan in place before discharge from the hospital.

After receiving a referral for a pregnant mother with SUD, or even after a baby is born with withdrawal symptoms, the safe care manager has a consultation with the mother and determines what her needs are:

baby supplies, housing, transportation, etc. Another meeting is held prior to the baby being discharged from the hospital, which is required by Child Protective Services, with as many people involved in caring for the child as possible. This includes the mother's support system, other children and youth involved, and other community assistance programs, which could get involved to let the mother know about services and resources available to her. The pediatrician facilitates that meeting with information about infant care and when follow-up visits should be conducted, and the hospital social worker is there to provide referrals as needed, which includes early intervention for the baby. The safe care manager then stays involved with the mother and child for up to a year. A plan is put in place to keep the baby safe and provide recovery support for the mother when she is willing. The safe care manager has received 150 referrals since the creation of the position in September 2020, which equates to one in seven babies born substance-affected in Northumberland County.

Lessons Learned

Fill in the gaps in conversation. Shandi Hill describes this gap as it being easy to address the people and the situations they are involved in when they are directly in front of you, but what typically falls through

the cracks are the individuals who are not directly involved—the children. “The kids are going through what those individuals who are justice-involved are going through,” Hill says. They are being directly affected by what they see.”

It's okay to invent the wheel. In Northumberland, there was a need for someone to transcend the existing job descriptions at both the United Way and Children and Youth Services to meet the requirements of updated laws and regulations. The safe care manager's job description and the policies and procedures to perform these functions were created from scratch to meet this need.

Schools are not the only place to connect with young people. Despite the setbacks of the COVID-19 pandemic seen all over the country on school and youth-based initiatives, WestCare was able to connect with other partners like the local Boys & Girls Club to get the Botvin LifeSkills Training curriculum shared with its desired audience, while Northumberland's partnership with the United Way helps increase their audience. Establishing these connections with other youth-centered organizations can increase the number of youth and families reached in the community.

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

About BJA

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