

North Berkshires Opioid Abatement Collaborative Quarterly Executive Summary DRAFT

Project inception through September 2025

Note- this is intended to serve as the foundation for a quarterly summary report to be shared with the HEAL Coalition, OAC Advisory Board, Berkshire Health Systems, the Attorney General's Office, DPH-BSAS, and other stakeholders. This initial version includes a history of the project through the first quarter of BRPC FY26. Future quarterly summaries are anticipated to be 1-2 pages and include additional data metrics as available.

Background and Activities Prior to 2025

The North Berkshire HEAL Coalition was established in the summer of 2022 as part of the National Institute for Health (NIH)-funded HEALing Communities Study (HCS), with the goal of reducing opioid overdoses in the region. This initiative built upon earlier collaborative efforts, including the Rx Heroin Group, and worked in coordination with the county-wide Berkshire Overdose and Addiction Prevention Collaborative (BOAPC). The Coalition focused on increasing naloxone distribution, promoting harm reduction and treatment services, and launching communications campaigns to reduce stigma around substance use. Although NIH funding concluded in December 2023, the Coalition continued through the dedication of community volunteers who sought new funding sources to sustain and expand its work.

A significant development in this effort was the reopening of North Adams Regional Hospital (NARH), which prompted Berkshire Health Systems (BHS) to convene a Community Advisory Board. Through a Determination of Needs (DoN) process, the Board voted to allocate community impact funds to support a full-time Community Coordinator. This position was designed to lead community-wide interventions addressing the dual crises of substance use disorder (SUD) and behavioral health in Northern Berkshire County. BHS committed funding for this role through fiscal year 2027, with the possibility of extending support through fiscal year 2029. To further sustain and expand the Coalition's work, eight municipalities—Adams, Cheshire, Clarksburg, Florida, New Ashford, North Adams, Savoy, and Williamstown—agreed to pool their opioid settlement funds into a shared initiative. This led to the formation of a state-recognized Opioid Abatement Collaborative (OAC), administered by the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission (BRPC). The OAC was established through an Intermunicipal Agreement (IMA) and is set to remain active through fiscal year 2039. A five-year Memorandum of Agreement (FY25–FY30) between the OAC, BRPC and BHS enables the hiring and support of the North County Community Coordinator, who will facilitate Coalition meetings, conduct a landscape analysis of SUD services, and develop and implement a community-driven strategic plan.

The pooled municipal funds are managed in a shared account, while BHS contributions are tracked separately and used first. BRPC ensures that all expenditures comply with the Attorney General Offices' (AGO) Abatement Terms and conducts due diligence to confirm that no other funding sources are available before utilizing settlement funds. In order to spread the funding out over the initial planned five years, reserve funds will be invested in an interest-bearing Money Market account for future use. Through this collaborative structure, the Coalition continues to serve as a vital space for cross-sector engagement, aiming to reduce the impact of substance use and strengthen the health and resilience of the Northern Berkshire community.

2025 BRPC Project Activities through September 2025

On January 28, 2025, following a series of presentations to Select Boards and discussions with Town Administrators, the **North Berkshire Intermunicipal Agreement (IMA)** was formally signed to establish partnership among eight municipalities and the BRPC to collaboratively manage and expend opioid settlements funds through the **North Berkshire Opioid Abatement Collaborative (OAC)**. BRPC serves as the Fiscal Host, handling fiscal and administrative duties, including grant management, compliance reporting, and fund tracking. Municipalities commit to contributing all received and future settlements funds, with provisions for withdrawal,

conflict resolution, and amendment. The agreement ensures transparency, equity, and adherence to state abatement terms, aiming to maximize regional impact through shared resources and coordinated efforts. On February 27, 2025, BRPC and BHS signed a related contract for BHS's contribution to the pooled funding. BRPC worked closely with the MA Association of Boards of Health (MAHB) to prepare and finalize these agreements.

With this funding in place, BRPC Senior Planner Andy Ottoson was able to take responsibility for coordinating the HEAL Coalition meetings, thanking Laini Sporbett and other volunteers who had kept the Coalition moving forward when it was between funders.

BRPC began facilitating the **monthly Coalition meetings**, following the established Monday morning schedule:

- The 3/24/25 meeting had 18 attendees representing a range of community organizations, municipalities, and service providers. The meeting focused on updates regarding the signed contract between BRPC and BHS for NARH funds, the formation and responsibilities of the OAC, and preparations for hiring a Community Coordinator. Members discussed outreach to municipalities for OAC designees, potential compensation for participation, and strategies for engaging new coalition members. The group also explored plans for the Into Light installation, the development of a decision-making process for fund allocation, and upcoming meetings to finalize a Coalition charter and identify uses of funds.
- The 4/28/25 meeting with 10 attendees focused on updates regarding municipal opioid settlement funds, planning for the first OAC meeting, and the upcoming hiring process for the North County Community Coordinator. Members discussed decision-making models for fund allocation, favoring a hybrid approach combining consensus and a voting structure. Additional updates included progress on Into Light, statewide funding concerns, EMS capacity improvements, and the development of a Charter Committee. The group also emphasized the importance of outreach and engagement, particularly with individuals with lived experience and community partners.
- The Coalition met on 5/19/25 with 15 attendees and covered updates on the first convening of the OAC Advisory Board and the formation of both a Charter Committee and a Coordinator Selection Committee. Erika Hensel from the AGO led a detailed discussion on allowable uses of opioid settlements funds, emphasizing their purpose as compensation for harms caused by the opioid industry and the importance of using them for opioid-specific prevention, treatment, recovery, and harm reduction. The group also explored potential funding priorities, including transitional housing, youth prevention, and community engagement strategies.
- The 6/23/25 meeting had 14 attendees and focused on reviewing the draft charter, which outlines an interim structure to support the incoming Community Coordinator and guide early strategic planning and fund allocation. Members discussed voting procedures, decision-making models, and the formation of a pilot committee. Updates included the Coordinator job posting, recent developments at Greylock Recovery, and evolving trends in substance use, including increased stimulant use and challenges with housing stability. The group also shared updates on community engagement efforts, including North Adams Pride.
- The 7/21/25 meeting had 16 attendees and included updates on new opioid settlements involving Purdue Pharma and other manufacturers, which will add to the pooled Program Budget. The group ratified the interim charter to guide decision-making and support the incoming Community Coordinator, whose job posting is live and attracting applicants. Planning for International Overdose Awareness Day (IAOD) and Recovery Month events is underway, with discussions on t-shirt design, community outreach, and media engagement. Updates from partners highlighted increased stimulant use, homelessness linked to residential program discharges, and the need for improved exit planning and coordination. A working group will be formed to address communication gaps and support individuals exiting treatment.
- The Coalition met on 8/18/25 with 15 attendees. Members discussed upcoming IOAD and Recovery Month events. Data shared from DPH showed a 13% decline in fatal overdoses in Berkshire County for 2024, though the county still holds the highest overdose rate in the state. The group also discussed the first three votes to allocate pooled funds: a discretionary budget for the Coordinator, Into Light funding, and supplemental funds for Recovery Month, including t-shirts that will be designed with input from

members of Have Hope Peer Recovery Center. All three votes were subsequently approved by the Voting Members, following the process established in the Interim Charter.

- The Coalition met on 9/22/25 with 16 attendees, starting with updates on municipal funds, onboarding plans for the Coordinator, and planning for Into Light, now supported by an additional \$15,000 pledge from BHS. Members reflected on successful Recovery Month events and discussed efforts to improve exit planning for individuals discharged from residential programs. The Coalition also began brainstorming ideas for a potential **MOSAIC RIZE Municipal Matching Grant** application, due November 7. The next meetings to further discuss and vote on a proposal are pending a scheduling survey.
- Two proposals were sent to a vote:
 - North Berkshire Substance Use Resource Guide and Services Communications – This proposal aims to create a concise, pocket-sized guide tailored to North Berkshire residents, especially those exiting residential programs or experiencing homelessness. It would complement existing county-wide resources and be developed with input from providers and individuals with lived experience. The Voting Members were also given the option to designate additional funds for future communications efforts TBD to promote awareness of existing resources.
 - North Berkshire Peer Advisory Board (PAB) – Modeled after the successful Pittsfield PAB facilitated by Berkshire Harm Reduction (BHR), this initiative would convene individuals with lived experience to inform local decision-making. BHR has already identified 14 interested participants. The board would meet bi-weekly with flexibility in scheduling.

Throughout this time period, BRPC has worked to increase engagement with the Coalition and recruit new members. This includes creating a one-page overview of the Coalition and its goals, which has been shared when tabling at community events, among members of Have Hope, and through community partners. Have Hope includes the flyer when tabling at community events.

BRPC further put together a comprehensive five-year budget that incorporates municipal contributions, BHS contributions, and future funders (both to the general pooled funds and those restricted to specific projects/ timeframes). The budget distributes funds necessary for BRPC to maintain the Coordinator role, along with the remaining Coalition Program Budget, over the initial planned five years with 3% annual inflation incorporated. As settlements funds are front-heavy, and funds from BHS and other funders must be used first, the bulk will be invested in an interest-earning Money Market account for even distribution.

BRPC, the Coalition and key community partners also began pursuing the following efforts:

The **North Berkshire HEAL Coalition Interim Charter**, ratified on 7/21/25, establishes a temporary governance structure to guide strategic planning and fund allocation for opioid abatement efforts in Northern Berkshire County. The Coalition serves as the primary decision-making body for the Program Budget. Voting is reserved for members who have attended at least two regular meetings and one of the last three, with each department within an organization allowed one vote. Votes are cast anonymously via SurveyMonkey using a points system—each voting member receives 11 points to distribute among proposal options. Proposals must meet criteria related to community need, equity, sustainability, and alignment with abatement terms. Final approval rests with BRPC and the Massachusetts Attorney General's Office.

The **North County Community Coordinator Hiring Committee** was formed to support the final stages of selecting a candidate for this key leadership role. Committee members were drawn from diverse sectors and were required to sign a confidentiality agreement affirming their commitment to protect applicant privacy, maintain the integrity of the process, and avoid any conflicts of interest. The agreement also required members to submit evaluations promptly and follow BRPC's structured interview protocols. The interview process included blind resume reviews conducted by BRPC, followed by a first-round interview, then second-round interviews with four finalists conducted by the Hiring Committee. Candidates were asked a standardized set of questions covering community engagement, substance use and behavioral health knowledge, project

management, and facilitation skills. Responses were scored using a five-point rubric, but final decisions were based on a holistic review rather than scores alone. Committee members provided written feedback and comments to support the final selection. Reference checks were conducted from contacts provided by the applicant, as well as prior employers. Though a lengthy process, BRPC anticipates the Coordinator will begin onboarding in early October of 2025.

Following a discussion on the IMA with the Adams Select Board, Carol Cushenette approached Andy Ottoson with several ideas for new initiatives. This included the **Into Light Project**, a national arts activism initiative that uses portraiture and storytelling to reduce stigma around the opioid epidemic and honor the lives lost to overdose. The Coalition and key partners are interested in bringing the exhibit to the Berkshires in March 2026, pairing national and Massachusetts-based panels with local stories and images. The exhibit will include educational materials, a facilitator's guide, and a button campaign to spark conversation and empathy. It is designed to engage students, families, recovery communities, and service providers, with the goal of fostering understanding and support across sectors. The installation is hoped to run for at least three months in a central, accessible North Berkshire location and will include harm reduction and recovery resources. The community is able to keep the panels after, allowing future installations throughout the county. The HEAL Coalition has voted to allocate up to \$15,000 in pooled funds to supplement the project, with BHS pledging an additional \$15,000. Additional funding may be sought from local agencies, businesses, and individuals to cover potential remaining costs TBD and support future installations.

In response to growing concerns among the Coalition about the vulnerability of individuals exiting residential treatment programs—whether upon graduation or against medical advice (AMA)—the Coalition initiated a working group to support **exit planning and resource awareness**. The first meeting of the working group was held on August 20, 2025, at Have Hope Peer Recovery Center, and included representatives from North Adams Police Department (NAPD), Berkshire Harm Reduction (BHR), and Have Hope. The group identified that many individuals, especially those from outside the region, often leave treatment without adequate knowledge of local services or a clear plan for continued support. This can lead to homelessness, isolation, and increased overdose risk. To address this, the group is developing a **North Berkshire Substance Use Resource Guide**, modeled after a similar effort in Pittsfield. The guide will include concise, accessible listings of harm reduction, treatment, recovery, and social supports, tailored to the North Berkshire community. It will be distributed through residential programs, service providers, first responders, and local businesses, and may be supplemented by posters, billboards, and other outreach efforts. The goal is to ensure that individuals leaving treatment are welcomed into the broader community and connected to the resources they need to continue their recovery journey safely and with dignity.

BRPC is **actively supporting the municipalities** in managing opioid settlement funds by working with DPH-BSAS and the AGO to help streamline financial tracking, invoicing, and annual reporting. On 9/22/25, BRPC sent municipal invoices based on the AGO's April 15, 2025 payment workbook, detailing amounts received and guiding administrators on how to verify and transfer funds. Additionally, BRPC worked closely with DPH-BSAS in **overhauling the state's required reporting**, helping streamline the process and improve the quality of the reporting for all Berkshire and statewide municipalities. BRPC was then able to provide step-by-step instructions for municipalities to complete their confirmation of amounts received and indicate participation in the North Berkshire OAC; BRPC then completed the remaining expenditure and programmatic reporting. BRPC also offered assistance with paperwork for the two newer settlements with [Purdue/Sackler](#) and [Alvogen et al](#), and are working to connect with the separate [McKinsey](#) settlements administrators. This coordinated approach ensures compliance with state guidelines, streamlines administrative processes, and helps municipalities across the Commonwealth maximize the impact of their funds locally.