

Voices of Resiliency: Utah Stories of Substance Use Disorder, Stigma, & Harm Reduction

Afterword

Have you ever woken up and watched the news, or read an obituary, or saw a post on social media that left you feeling deflated? Perhaps like there was so much bad news out there, that you didn't even know where to begin? And maybe at the same time, you wanted things to be better, but you didn't know where to start.

This series of graphic stories, companion podcast Debunked, <https://www.upr.org/podcast/debunked>, community programming, like the community conversations, supported by Utah Humanities, and other projects linked to this work began out of a morning like the one described. While we are deeply proud of the finished product you are holding in your hands or reading online, we also want to convey that you too can make your community better by launching community-based, participatory projects that can lead to all kinds of creative outcomes and impacts.

One week, I (Sandra Sulzer) got a call from my colleague Suzanne Prevedel concerned about the rising death toll due to overdoses in her Utah community. The problems associated with drug use may sometimes seem insurmountable: how do we show compassion in the face of War on Drugs laws? How do we keep families together? How do we support people who want to reduce or eliminate drug use? No scientist or expert or professional needs to be in charge. Whoever you are? If you care: you're qualified.

Below, we provide a brief overview of the steps we took, that you can take too, if you see an issue in your community that you would like to help transform.

1. Get a group of people together and a white board (or the online equivalent). You want a mix of people with different views from different walks of life, but you also want to make sure the group feels safe and inclusive, so people won't be afraid to speak up.
 - a. Find out what the biggest problems are, as people see it, from all of their unique vantages.
 - b. Find out what kinds of solutions people want to see.
 - c. Figure out who has resources that could help with some of the solutions.
 - d. Figure out what resources are still needed.
2. Build an action plan from your white board brainstorm session(s) and map out the steps needed. Some outcomes will be more ambitious, like perhaps changing a state law, and some will be smaller, like having someone lead a community workshop or conversation.
3. Figure out who can do which pieces and start talking to people. You've got a plan. Now you need allies, advocates, co-conspirators, possibly some resources and some specific know-how in some cases. One of my (SS) first conversations in this work was with Erin Madden, a harm reduction researcher. And she has been essential to every step of our project. Our other harm reduction consultant is someone I met on a trip in Thailand; I found out she was working in San Francisco, so I set up a call. A key partner, Lauren Hymas, was my yoga teacher. I mentioned the project after class one day, and before I knew it, we had a whole new team on board, including her husband Jay, whose story is featured here. Our illustrators were two women I met in graduate school. I was hiking one day with a friend and she suggested I meet with Randy Williams, who ended up guiding the ethnographic process and creation of a digital collection honoring first-hand experiences of substance use disorder. Even someone who came to service my furnace heard me on a call and offered up his story. All these people invited other key players. What I mean is:

whether you are at a grocery store, a soccer game, or traveling, if you are passionate about the work and keep talking about it, you will find all the people you need with all the skills required to execute whatever you're envisioning. You will be surprised who in your community is ready to join, once you let them know what you're up to.

4. Once you have a plan, and you have a team, you'll undoubtedly have successes and challenges. This project took more than four funding sources and almost five years to come to fruition. Some team members will come and go, some goals will shift, and your vision may evolve. But don't let that be daunting: the entire process creates a network of people who are organized and ready for the next issue you decide to tackle. And all of it is one big antidote to waking up and feeling hopeless. You will see progress, you will make changes, and it will inspire you to keep going.

We are so delighted that you have joined us on this journey as one of our readers. We have included some resources below if you would like to start working toward change in your community. And we're all here, if you ever want to reach out to get support for your change-making efforts.

Sandra H. Sulzer and Randy Williams, June 2022

Resources

A guide to community action best practices: Research Methods for Community Change: A Project Based Approach by Randy Stocker. This is a practical guide written by the mentor who taught me everything I know. <https://bit.ly/3xb4lpJ>

Examples of other communities following this model: *Crackdown Pod* outlines another community starting with a white board. "Drug users are the experts. We've survived. We know policy better than policymakers. We know law better than lawmakers. We know pharmaceuticals better than pharmacists. We know nobody's coming to save us. So we gotta save ourselves." <https://bit.ly/38TzA0k>

How to make storytelling work: Trust is an important aspect of any storytelling endeavor. Sarah Copeland and Aldo de Moor's "Community Digital Storytelling for Collective Intelligence: Towards a Storytelling Cycle of Trust," addresses "how shared stories can bring impetus to community groups to help identify what they seek to change, and how digital storytelling can be effectively implemented in community partnership projects to enable authentic voices to be carried to other stake-holders in society." <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00146-017-0744-1>

Guide for adding diverse voices to the historical record: Your project may be aided by archival documents that give voice to the issue you desire to change. As well, your work may include ethnographic projects, with the aim of creating archival records to enhance the historical record which have long overlook the most marginalized groups. For ideas on this work see "Utah State University's Cache Valley Latinx Voices Project: Social Justice in the Archives," by Randy Williams, Eduardo Ortiz, and Maria Luisa Spicer-Escalante. <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/westernarchives/vol10/iss1/9/> And, "[Voices from Drug Court: Partnering to Bring Historically Excluded Communities into the Archives](https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1096&context=westernarchives)," by Randy Williams and Jennifer Duncan. <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1096&context=westernarchives>

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