



WCS Connection

October 2023



From the desk of the WCS President & CEO: Drug Overdose Deaths Persist

Drug-involved overdose deaths in local communities across the state and nation continue to be a persistent and deadly problem that must be addressed. Unfortunately, drug overdose deaths have been steadily increasing for the past several decades and escalated in the last five years. Nationally, in 1999, there were approximately 20,000 overdose deaths. By 2019, the number increased to 70,630, and by 2021, that number increased to approximately 107,000, representing a sharp increase during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Milwaukee County, drug-related overdose deaths increased from 419 in 2019 to 674 in 2022, again representing a sharp increase during the pandemic years. Many reports have linked the stress and isolation experienced during the pandemic as reasons for the sharp increase in drug overdose deaths. Ironically, the federal COVID-19 public health emergency ended on May 11th. However, in the aftermath of the pandemic, our communities are left with the vexing challenge of dealing with a drug overdose death surge exacerbated by the pandemic that will not recede with the end of the COVID-19 public health emergency.

The overdose death numbers in Milwaukee County are slightly better for January-September of 2023 compared to the same time for 2022 (498 versus 505). The 1% decrease in the numbers during the last year is nothing to celebrate, but at least suggests we may be heading in the right direction. Milwaukee County leaders have declared that the most critical first step in addressing the problem of drug overdose deaths is to acknowledge that it exists. Thanks to the efforts of many stakeholders, elected and public health officials, we have been effective at sounding the alarm and recognizing that we have a serious public health epidemic. Many organizations like Wisconsin Community Services have stepped up to provide, and in our case expand, services to address substance use issues and are working collaboratively with others to improve the situation. As a community, we are doing more in harm reduction to mitigate the number of deaths and the overall negative impact of illicit drug usage, along with enlisting the support of people with lived experience to be leaders in combating this problem. To be clear, we have a long way to go. We are just at the beginning stages and will need the commitment of everyone pulling in the same direction to reach our goal of eradicating this problem in our communities. We simply cannot afford to let this problem continue to destroy people, families, and communities.



CDLRE Honored with Community Development Award



From left to right: Sarah Martis, Executive Director of the Milwaukee Bar Association; Clarence Johnson, President and CEO of WCS; Susan Lund, Supervising Attorney with Legal Action of Wisconsin; Jessie Long, Attorney, Legal Action of Wisconsin; Sara Carpenter, Vice President of WCS Court and Community Reintegration Services; Jay Tucker, WCS Administrator of Community Reintegration Services; Taffie Foster Toney, WCS CDLRE Lead Case Manager, and Emil Ovbialgele, Milwaukee Bar Association President.

The Center for Driver's License Recovery & Employability (CDLRE) received the Milwaukee Bar Association's (MBA) 2023 Community Development Award during an October ceremony. The WCS program earned the award because of its contributions to sustainable development, equality, economic opportunity, and social justice through the organization, education, and empowerment of people in the Greater Milwaukee Area.

"The MBA is proud to recognize the work of the Center for Driver's License Recovery & Employability with the 2nd Annual Community Development Award," said MBA Executive Director, Sarah J. Martis. "By providing expert assistance and representation, this program helps participants obtain a valid driver's license so they can go to work, attend school, and care for their families. Driver's license recovery helps put a stop to the cycle of poverty, job loss, police contact, legal system involvement, and debt associated with driver's license suspensions, all of which disproportionately harm people of color."



WCS Hosted its First Recovery Forum

By Eric Diamond, LCSW, Director of Innovation and Special Projects at WCS

A small team of Wisconsin Community Services (WCS) staff recently developed and hosted the organization's first Recovery Forum, a four-session training series for mental health and substance use treatment providers. The training sessions, which were made possible through a grant from the Wisconsin Department of Health Services, drew a total audience of 555 people from throughout the state over the course of the four-weekly sessions, that began Sept. 26.



The Recovery Forum offered training on trauma, diversity equity and inclusion (DEI), and cultural wisdom, strategies to improve connection and engagement, and community building. Key WCS staff involved included: Eric Diamond, Chyra Trost, Chad Meinholdt, Danielle Callahan, Sarah Forcey, Startina White, Michelle Laga, Torre Johnson, Kenneth Ryback, and Karole Kimble. Their incredible contributions made the Recovery Forum a huge success. If you were not able to attend this time, we hope you will join us when offer all four sessions again as the Winter 2024 Recovery Forum which will be offered starting in late January.



WCS Participated in 2023 NAMI Walks

WCS participated in the annual NAMI Walks on Oct. 7, continuing the organization's tradition of supporting a NAMI Southeast Wisconsin event that advocates for "mental health for all." Walking under the name "WCS Stigma Stompers," the team of WCS employees, their families, and friends raised more than \$535 – more than double the goal they had set.



WCS has a longstanding relationship with NAMI Southeast Wisconsin. Because of this relationship, and the fact that NAMI champions a cause that's so important to the mission of WCS, WCS annually contributes funds to sponsor a team of walkers. WCS is always looking for more participants in the annual event, which serves as a fun, yet impactful way of building community awareness of mental health.



Harm Reduction Vending Machine Placed at WCS North Campus

A vending machine carrying potentially lifesaving supplies has been placed at the WCS North Campus. The "Harm Reduction Vending Machine" provides free access to fentanyl test strips, nasal naloxone, medication deactivation pouches, medication lock bags, and gun locks in the lobby of the 2610 W. North Avenue location. It is accessible Monday – Friday, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., and Saturday – Sunday, 8 a.m. to 12 p.m.



The vending machine is being granted to WCS by Milwaukee County Behavioral Health Services which selected 11 sites for the awards following a comprehensive application process that included a review of data identifying which areas have the greatest need for the lifesaving materials. The project will be studied so that Milwaukee County can decide where to place 14 more Harm Reduction Vending Machines in 2024, according to the Milwaukee County Executive's office.

In early 2023, the Milwaukee County Board voted to allocate \$11 million in opioid settlement funds to support 15 projects over the next three years. In addition to the harm reduction supplies, these projects include education and treatment for youth involved in the justice system and other opioid prevention measures. Milwaukee County has one of the highest rates of overdose deaths in Wisconsin.



Annual WCS Community Resource & Job Fair a Success

The 7th Annual Community Resource & Job Fair was held on Sept. 13 at the WCS North Campus. Organized by the WCS Black Male Advisory Council (BMAC), the event served as a platform for essential information sharing in areas such as employment, financial literacy, legal services, health and nutrition, behavioral health services, education, parenting and fatherhood, and driver's license recovery with an aim of strengthening the community. People in attendance had the opportunity to network with employers and service providers, gain exposure, and connect with some of the resources available in Milwaukee.



WCS invited vital service providers and businesses in the community to participate by sharing their resources and information. The event was open to the public and everyone enjoyed a complimentary lunch and a short program highlighting the contributions of local leaders. Almost 100 people attended the event, which saw the participation of over 50 community resources and employers combined. The event was a great success, helping WCS towards its mission of providing innovative opportunities for individuals to overcome adversity.



Looking for People to Join the WCS Team!

Are you a dedicated, diligent, and caring individual? Why not work at WCS and become part of the team in one of the following positions:

Case Manager – Jefferson County Alcohol Treatment Court and Drug Treatment Court
Help make our roads and communities safer by providing case management with intensive support, supervision, and monitoring of those participating in the Jefferson County Alcohol Treatment. The person hired will also provide case management for Jefferson County Drug Treatment Court participants. He or she will share the responsibility of managing a 40 to 50-participant caseload per year, from intake to discharge. During this time, the person hired will provide structure, accountability, and support to participants in recovery. Qualified candidates will have a bachelor's degree in criminal justice or a related field. Knowledge of the justice system and case management experience is preferred.

Part-Time Caseworker – OWI Kenosha
Enjoy fulfilling work by providing pretrial case management of repeat intoxicated drivers for the Circuit Courts of Kenosha County. The person hired for this position will handle scheduling and provide weekly supervision, conduct program orientation and intake, administer and record random breathalyzer tests and urinalysis drug testing, and more. The position requires approximately 29 hours of work per week. Qualified candidates will have a bachelor's degree in criminal justice, social work, or a related field. Knowledge of the justice system and case management experience is preferred.

Youth CCS Care Coordinator
Create positive change in the lives of children and their families by working as a Youth CCS Care Coordinator. This position utilizes the Wraparound Practice model, which emphasizes individualized, strength-based, trauma-informed, community-based care for children and adolescents. The person hired will maintain a caseload of approximately 14 youth and families. This involves developing comprehensive crisis plans, facilitating child and family team meetings, completing wellness checks, and more. Qualified candidates must have a bachelor's degree pertaining to education or human services, a working knowledge of youth development, and at least one year of experience providing mental health services.

We invite you to visit www.wiscs.org/careers to view a full list of current job openings at WCS.



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Wisconsin Community Services, Inc. (WCS) advocates for justice and community safety, providing innovative opportunities for individuals to overcome adversity.

WCS is a 501(c) 3 non-profit agency that provides services in southeastern Wisconsin. WCS has been serving the community successfully for 111 years.

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