

Harm Reduction & Community Organizing

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Katal combines harm reduction and community organizing to build community power and the public will for public health and criminal justice reform. This model promotes a more stigma-free approach to drug, health and criminal justice policy, preserves autonomy, provides structures for healing, and builds efficacy and leadership of directly impacted people.

At Katal, we use a harm reduction approach in our work to organize neighborhoods and communities around issues of public health and public safety. We believe it is important to meet individuals “where they are” in order to effectively build their leadership and skills for advocacy. We use community organizing to develop the leadership of community members and bolster advocacy from the ground up. Employing harm reduction principles helps to sharpen the tools that

community organizers use for recruitment and leadership development, including door knocking, canvassing and holding one on one meetings. This has resulted in helping the people living, working or worshipping within municipalities to gain increased access to public health services as a direct response to issues of public safety. This methodology builds local power for people in historically marginalized communities where those directly impacted reside. As an added

benefit, community organizers trained in harm reduction can become assets to harm reductionists whose primary roles involve regular direct service provision to their constituents.

When working in collaboration, community organizers and harm reductionists are more effective in engaging people that are the hardest to reach, including people in historically marginalized urban neighborhoods and rural areas. This collaboration provides a particularly useful framework for engaging people living in homes with a person or people involved in the criminal justice system, who are often faced with multiple, interlocking barriers to health and safety access. For example, people who are formerly incarcerated and frequently deal with compounding challenges related to substance use and access to emergency care services, can be equipped with life-saving training and naloxone to reverse an overdose. The caregivers, congregations, neighbors, families, service providers, educators, and business owners in these areas are also sometimes marginalized through systemic bias and/or intra-community cultures of stigma and shame.

While harm reduction makes public health and the immediate access to support and resources the cornerstone of any effort, community

organizing is utilized to build new coalitions and strengthen existing alliances in neighborhoods and rural towns. Through this process, people can then demand the systemic changes and policy reforms needed to eliminate racial, cultural and geographic barriers to accessing health care.

This approach is being used across neighborhoods wishing to enact systemic change, as is the case with the Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD) project in Albany, NY. LEAD uses a non-coercive, harm reduction approach to divert individuals from the criminal justice system and into effective services. Through LEAD, communities are re-orienting Albany's approach to issues of substance use, mental health, and poverty.¹ This process includes efforts to initiate transparent and meaningful community-municipal partnerships to address historical racial disparities in arrests within the City. In this way, initiatives like LEAD serve as both a "program" that addresses immediate issues of public health and public safety, and a "process" that works toward addressing broader structural, municipal, and societal issues.

¹Albany LEAD Policy Coordinating Group. Report to Albany on the LEAD Program: One Year Anniversary, 2017. Accessed June 1, 2017 from: https://www.albanyny.org/Libraries/APD/2017_Albany_LEAD_First_Year_Report_--_FINAL-2.sfb.ashx

By utilizing the tools of both community organizing and harm reduction, community leaders can more effectively build power, improve health and safety, and transform systems.