

Monroe County C.A.C.T.U.S. (Community Action Coalition Committed to Uprooting Stigma): Changing the Conversation Around Substance Use Disorder

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Monroe County C.A.C.T.U.S.:

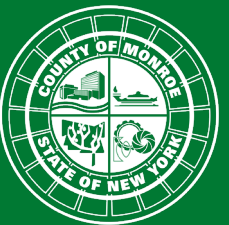
Changing the Conversation Around Substance Use Disorder



Monroe County IMPACT Team
Monroe County Department of Public Health
Addiction Services Division

Take a look around!

15 September 2025



FORMS OF STIGMA

Professional

Judgmental attitudes and actions of healthcare and social service providers towards clients.

Structural (Institutional)

Public & private institutional laws, regulations, policies, or societal structures which decrease opportunities for people with substance use or co-occurring concerns.

Public (Enacted)

When the public endorses negative stereotypes, prejudice, resulting in discrimination against people with substance use or mental health.



FORMS OF STIGMA

Self

When an individual with a substance use or mental health concern internalizes public stigma.

Perceived

The belief that others have negative feelings or opinions about people with substance use or mental health.

Intersectional

Stigmas experienced as an individual of other marginalized groups.



FORMS OF STIGMA

Stigma By Association

Judgmental attitudes and actions of healthcare and social service providers towards clients.

Label Avoidance

When an individual decides not to pursue substance use or mental health treatment to avoid being assigned a stigmatizing label.

* One of the most harmful forms of stigma.

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STIGMA refers to the negative attitudes, beliefs, and stereotypes associated with certain behaviors or conditions, including substance use disorders.

- Substance Use Disorder Stigma often stems from misconceptions that addiction is a moral failing or a lack of willpower, rather than a treatable or chronic medical condition.



Monroe County Addiction Services IMPACT Team

Monroe County Department of Public Health

- Post-overdose Response Team
- Street Outreach
- Naloxone Boxes
- Community education through events and Narcan training
- 24/7 Hotline Support
- Community Partnership



15 September 2025



How does stigma show up?

- Outreach and early community messages

"I wouldn't help at all if I saw someone was overdosing."

"I don't hang around those kind of people"

"Addicts just need. . ."

"We don't have those problems in this area"

- Coalition and Community Feedback
- Community demographics (MCOME, 2025)
- Factors that contribute to inequity (RASE Report)
 - Poverty- driven by social history (redlining)
 - Lack of structural cultural and linguistic competency
 - Access to Resources
 - Inequitable Systems
 - Stigma

Race	Percent of Overdose Deaths	Monroe County General Population Estimate ^a
White or Caucasian	67.5%	76.0%
Black or African American	31.2%	16.5%
Asian	1.4%	3.9%
Other ^b	0.0%	3.7%
Hispanic ^c	14.0%	10.1%



How does stigma show up?

Research

- **Racial disparity:** Older African American adults are more likely to internalize stigma and express less positive attitudes about mental health treatment than their white counterparts (Connor, Copeland, Grote 2010).
- **Law enforcement:** A majority of officers held stigmatizing views towards people with OUD, including distrust (92% felt the need to be on guard) and blame (most felt people with OUD were responsible for their condition)(Reichert, 2021)
- **Treatment:** ‘Stigma has major negative impacts on health and well being, which helps explain why only 18% of people with drug use disorders receive treatment’ -Nora Volkow, *STAT News*, 2021

Local Survey Results

- 44.5% of individuals we encounter in the community report having substance use disorder affecting them or their family (MCDPH, 2025)
- 177 survey respondents report fear of stigma and negative judgment prevent them from seeking treatment, the second most common factor reported (MCDPH, 2025)
- Highest ranked barrier to care is “Negative stigma associated with opioid addiction” (City of Rochester, 2025)
- RASE Report identified stigma as a key issue preventing people from seeking and accessing needed care for addiction. (RASE, 2021)



The Solution:

Community Action Coalition Committed to Uprooting Stigma (C.A.C.T.U.S.)

What is CACTUS?

CACTUS is a community coalition, housed at the Monroe County Department of Health, convened to identify the causes of stigma, educate our community on the impact of stigma, and eliminate stigma surrounding substance use.

CACTUS Objectives

- Raise public awareness
- Support individuals with substance use disorder (SUD), in active use, in recovery along with their family, friends, and supports
- Promote inclusive language and behavior
- Influence policy and systems change
- Build community partnerships
- Promote positive media representation
- Evaluate and monitor the impact of our initiatives.



Focus Sectors

- **Peers – People with Lived Experience**
- Healthcare & Behavioral/Mental Health
- **Housing & Social Services**
- Faith & Spiritual Communities
- **Youth Serving Organizations**
- **Law Enforcement & Justice system**
- **Government & Policy Makers**
- Education
- **Community–Based Organizations**
- Businesses & Employers
- Youth & Student Groups

Common Ground
Health

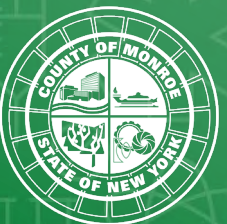
RECOVERY
FITNESS
SOBER LIVING THROUGH FITNESS



Department of Public Health
Office of Mental Health
Research, Strategy, and Development



UNIVERSITY of
ROCHESTER



Coalition Building

Month 1 to 6: Recruitment & Relationship Building

- Meeting with potential members and referrals
- Attending conferences and training
- Understanding perspective of those with lived experience
- Key Resource: CADCA Strengthening Partnership Toolkit

Month 6: Introductory Meeting

- Reinforced the 'why'
- Discuss expectations and proposed initiatives

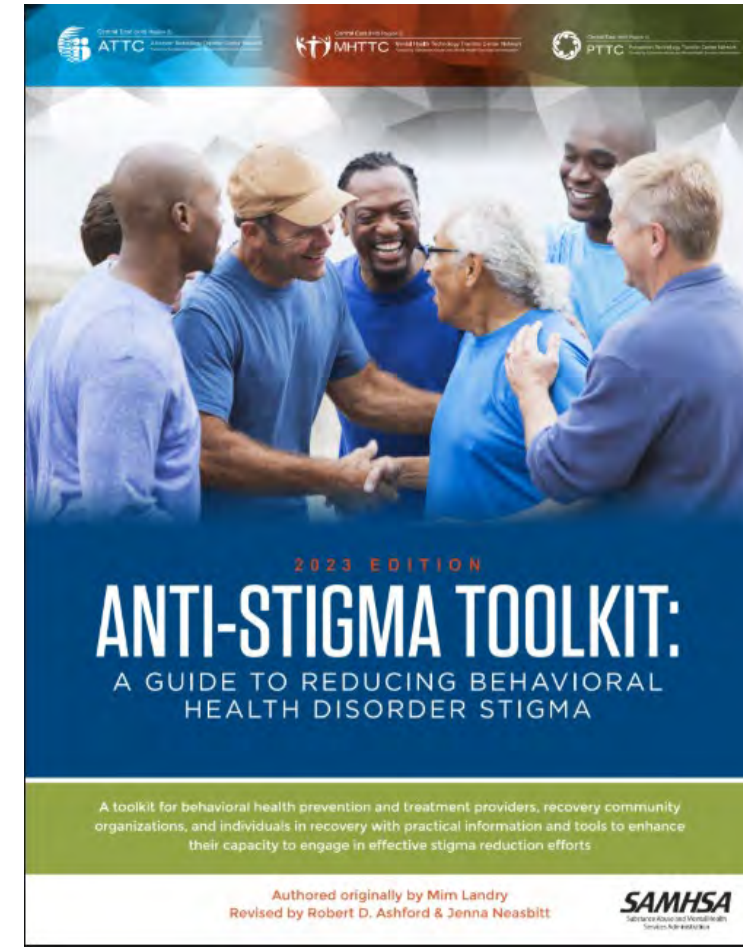
Month 7 & 8: Develop structure and finalize Year 1 projects

- Identify workgroup interests and leads
- Key Resource: CADCA 7 Strategies for Creating Effective Community Change

Month 9: Coalition in Action!

- Monthly coalition meetings
- Bi-weekly work group meetings and project development

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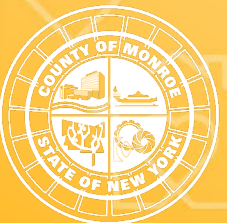


CACTUS Year 1 Initiatives

Evidence-Based Approaches

- **Education** – specifically mental health literacy
- **Protest and advocacy** (letter writing –campaigns on social media platforms)
- **Contact-based programs that increase connections & awareness.** Social contact between those with or without substance use or mental health concerns
- **Contact-based education programs.** Combination of education content designed to raise public awareness or increase public knowledge on SUD and mental health
- **Media campaigns**
- **Peer programs**

Consideration of unique learning styles leads to multifaceted approach



Stigma Survey

- Provides insight into beliefs, attitudes, and practices and how it presents in various groups
- **Evidence Based Approach:** Promoting advocacy and providing education
- **Focus Sectors**
 - Law Enforcement
 - Healthcare
 - Higher education
 - Social services
- Customized interventions following survey results
 - Anti Stigma Training Program
 - Handheld Materials
 - Call-to-action partnerships (ex. Leave Behind Program with Law Enforcement)



Anti-Stigma Training Program

- **Evidence-based Practice:** Education, Advocacy, Contact-based programs that increase connections & awareness
- **Focus Sectors:**
 - **Law Enforcement:** City of Rochester Police Department, Monroe County Sheriff's Office, academy cadets
 - **Healthcare:** health care providers (ED), treatment providers and staff
 - **Higher Education** educators and staff
 - **Social Services:** case managers/coordinators, outreach workers
- Addresses harmful biases, language, and misconceptions; approaches topics in a thoughtful and organized way; eases and normalizes conversations; encourages personal reflection
- **Anticipated outcomes:**
 - Improved quality of care
 - Eliminate discrimination in key systems
 - Promote recovery-oriented language and culture
 - Encourages support seeking; empowers and supports inclusion and dignity
 - Improved public health outcomes



Anti-Stigma Symbol and Workbook

Phase One: Utilizing an anti-stigma workbook/journal with teens to increase understanding of substance use and stigma

Phase Two (2026): Implement a contest in which students create an anti-stigma symbol

- **Evidence-based approach:** Education, advocacy
- **Focus Sectors:** Youth, Educators
- Approaches sensitive topics in a thoughtful and organized way; eases and normalizes conversations; encourages personal reflection

Outcomes: Crucial feedback from teen focus group and coalition partners

- ✓ Age-appropriate
- ✓ Culturally responsive
- ✓ Trauma-informed
- ✓ Evidence- based



Media Campaigns and Storytelling

Evidence-based practice that targets all sectors

Goals

- Demystifying use and recovery
- Celebrating success
- Empowerment through storytelling
- Generate community acceptance
- Bring personal stories and experiences to life, driving change through the power of emotion
- Influence behavior change

Strategies

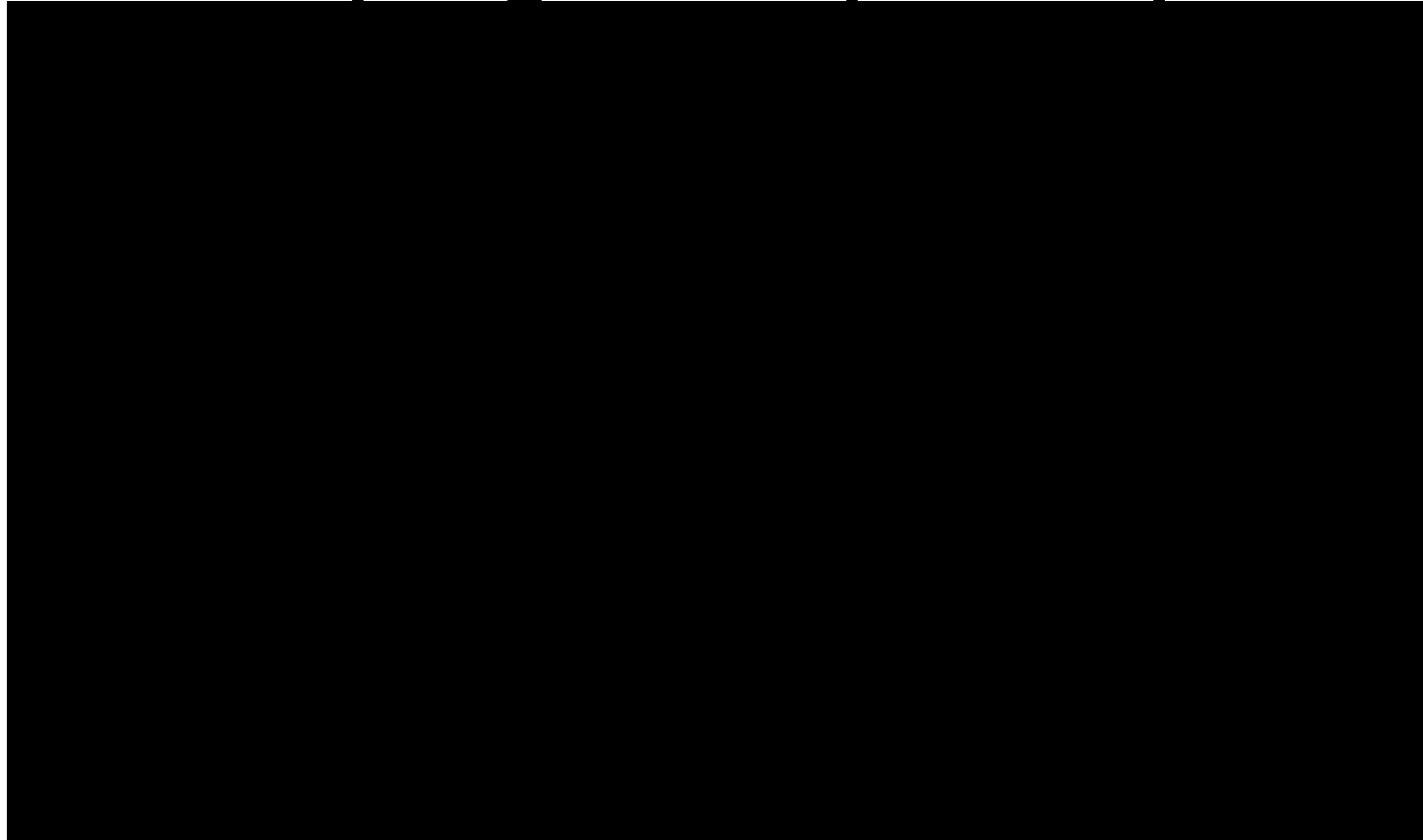
- Utilize community champions and Opinion Leaders
- Empower the public through call-to-action
- Identify positive outcomes
- Message repetition
- Multifaceted mass media approach (print, radio, television, social media)

Key Measures in Year 1

- 2,521,180 Impressions, 32,496 Video Completions on Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, and TikTok
- 10,273 Visits to Addiction Services Website
- 385 Calls to Addiction Services Crisis hotline
- Stigma survey results
- Community feedback



Media Campaigns- Spokesperson videos



Media Campaigns

Billboards and bus station ads

**STOP THE STIGMA,
START THE
CONVERSATION**

Stigmatizing language can reduce the willingness of individuals with substance use disorder to seek treatment.

**Father
Co-Worker
Chef
Community
Member**

For treatment options & support call **585-753-5300**

An advertisement featuring a portrait of a Black man with a beard and short hair, wearing a blue denim shirt. The background is split into green and purple sections. Text on the left encourages stopping stigma and starting conversation, noting that stigmatizing language can reduce the willingness of individuals with substance use disorder to seek treatment. Text on the right lists roles: Father, Co-Worker, Chef, and Community Member. At the bottom, it provides a phone number for treatment options and support.

IF YOU CHOOSE TO USE, PLAY IT SAFE.

In 2023, 8 out of 10 overdose deaths in Monroe County involved a mix of fentanyl and cocaine.

**Test your drugs. Carry Naloxone.
Never use alone.**

For Treatment options and support
585-753-5300

An advertisement featuring a portrait of a Black man with a beard and short hair, wearing a white t-shirt. The background is a light blue wall. Text at the top encourages playing it safe if using drugs. It states that in 2023, 8 out of 10 overdose deaths in Monroe County involved a mix of fentanyl and cocaine. It urges testing drugs, carrying Naloxone, and never using alone. At the bottom, it provides a phone number for treatment options and support.

**SALVÉ UNA VIDA
LLAMANDO AL 9-1-1.**

Si ve una sobredosis, llame al 9-1-1.
La Ley del Buen Samaritano puede
protegerle y SALVAR VIDAS.

**ADAM J. BELLO
COUNTY CLERK**

An advertisement featuring a portrait of a woman with long dark hair, wearing a plaid jacket over a white shirt. The background is a gradient of blue and purple. Text at the top encourages saving a life by calling 9-1-1. It states that if someone sees an overdose, they should call 9-1-1. It mentions that the Good Samaritan Law can protect them and save lives. At the bottom, it identifies Adam J. Bello as the County Clerk.

Anti-Stigma Handheld Materials



- **Evidence-based Practice:** Education, Protest and Advocacy, Media Campaigns
- **Sectors of focus:** Community-level change, Youth, Healthcare
- Words shape thought- educate on why language that centers the individual instead of diagnosis empowers others
- Expand upon the person-first language that is woven into our current print materials on Substance Use Disorder
- Provide connection to community resources and Addiction Services hotline

Anticipated Outcomes:

- Raise public awareness & sustains awareness beyond the moment
- Reduces stigma through language and framing
- Promote hope and recovery
- Challenges misconceptions; Reduce shame and stereotypes
- Normalizes recovery and harm reduction



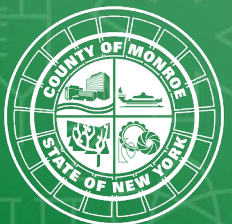
Community Murals

- **Evidence-based Practice:** Education, Protest and Advocacy, Media Campaigns
- **Focus Sector:** Community-level change
- An impactful tool that reaches community members, raises awareness, educates, empowers, and promotes healing and social change.
- Displayed through art on buildings, electrical boxes, and sidewalks with local artist involvement
- **Anticipated outcomes:**
 - Raise public awareness
 - Reduce shame and stereotypes
 - Promote hope and recovery
 - Challenges misconceptions
 - Builds community connections
 - Highlights local artists, art as a powerful learning tool
 - Beautifies public spaces
 - Inspires similar efforts



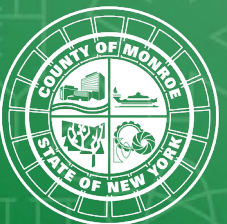
Looking Ahead

- Year 2 initiatives
 - Year 2 of Call-to-Action Storytelling Campaign
 - Expand youth focus (ex. anti-stigma symbol contest, student leaders)
 - Expand handheld materials (grief support group materials, myths vs facts)
 - Storytelling and website development
- Coalition building
 - Promote coalition through community presence and onboard new members
 - Incorporate new sectors into coalition membership: re-entry, peers, youth
- Ongoing training for coalition members
- Explore additional funding opportunities for sustainability
- Changing conversation through responsive, adaptive, creative, and culturally appropriate solutions



Key Takeaways

- Select members with a strong vision and ideas
- Creative approaches (which in this case is art in all its shapes and forms) generate passion and excitement
- Provide ample opportunity for all members to contribute
- Simple, straightforward action items are best
- Nurturing partner relationships with time and energy leads to a cohesive group
- Work to keep people engaged through regular communication, required subcommittee participation, and clear expectations
- As a coalition we must always prioritize educating ourselves and becoming students as we navigate and implement initiatives
 - Reinforce understanding of unique perspectives
 - Set standards for group communication



Thank you!

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24 Hour IMPACT Opioid Crisis Hotline: 585-753-5300

<https://www.monroecounty.gov/health-impact>



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