Columbus County Impact Report Narratives for Fiscal Year 2024-2025

Each local government that receives opioid settlement funds is asked to share an Annual Settlement Update describing how they have made use of settlement funds during each fiscal year. For each strategy funded, local governments also share additional narratives to describe their progress and successes (success information is optional for some local governments). Across all funded strategies, each local government selects one progress narrative and one success narrative to spotlight each fiscal year.

Columbus County provided the following narrative information for Fiscal Year 2024-2025 (July 2024 through June 2025):

Annual Settlement Update

Columbus County has an Opioid Steering Committee, appointed by the County Commissioners, who met every other month during FY25 to monitor progress on its strategies and activities associated with the opioid settlement funds and the strategic plan. The Committee adopted a model entitled a Recovery Oriented System of Care (ROSC) and has used the opioid settlement funds to develop strategies and programs in the 5 areas of the ROSC: Harm Reduction, Prevention, Intervention, Treatment, and Recovery Supports. In this current year, the Opioid Steering Committee developed a marketing plan, marketing theme, and materials and began to distribute those materials to local government services, as well as at health fairs and other public events. The Campaign theme is Quit-It Columbus/Hope Starts Here, Help Starts Now! A Facebook page was developed to provide community education on opioids, interventions, and services, to educate the Columbus County residents about substance use, and to attempt to start to deal with the stigma associated with substance use. Also, the County began working on developing a new Adult Recovery Court for those in the criminal justice system who have high risk/high need of reoffending and where opioids and other drugs were an integral part of the crimes they committed. The County applied for and received free technical assistance and training from the National Drug Court through the AllRise organization. This training was slated to occur in August 2025 with the new Recovery Court slated to begin in September 2025.

Strategy Spotlights

❖ Exhibit B, Strategy G1: Prevent Misuse of Opioids: Fund media campaigns to prevent opioid misuse

Progress Narrative

During the previous funding year, it became evident to the Opioid Steering Committee that a comprehensive and impactful marketing approach and media campaign was required. The implementation of this comprehensive marketing strategy occurred during this reporting period.

This strategy encompassed the creation of a distinctive logo and a diverse range of public messaging tools suitable for deployment on billboards, yard signs, and social media platforms. By taking this approach, Columbus County delivered information and messaging that resonates effectively with its residents. This marketing strategy reflects a commitment to engaging the community in a more compelling and resonant manner. It also underscores the county’s dedication to tackling opioid-related

challenges through effective communication and education, ensuring that residents are well-informed and empowered to make positive choices regarding their health and well-being.

The marketing campaign launched in September 2024 and includes billboards, yard signs, posters, brochures, mailings, a website for the campaign, advertising on local radio, and a Facebook page.

❖ **Exhibit B, Strategy G1: Prevent Misuse of Opioids: Fund media campaigns to prevent opioid misuse**

Success Narrative
County staff received an email from a Columbus County resident who found the crisis line number from the marketing materials. This email read "I'm writing to extend my deepest thanks to the Columbus County Commissioners and each of you for providing access to critical resources in Columbus County's Opioid Settlement Program. Because of the resources and systems you've put in place, I was able to provide my mother with the 24-hour crisis hotline number so she could share it with a family member in need. That call led to the individual's admission to the Healing Place of New Hanover County at 3:00 a.m. on Sunday. While we recognize that the road ahead will have its challenges, their family is hopeful and incredibly grateful that access to treatment was available when it was most needed. Because of the systems you've worked so hard to establish—through advocacy, coordination, and care—families in Columbus County have access to real solutions in moments of crisis. Please know that your work is making a tangible difference in the lives of those facing addiction and the hearts of the families who love them. Your dedication, coordination, and commitment to creating real avenues for recovery are making a profound difference. Please know that your efforts are seen, valued, and truly impactful."

Progress and Success Narratives for All Funded Strategies

❖ **Exhibit A, Strategy 1: Collaborative Strategic Planning**

Progress Narrative
The county applied for and received a grant for free technical assistance and training from the National Drug County through the AllRise organization. This three-day training will be provided to the Columbus County Recovery Court team in August 2025 to prepare for the launch of the Recovery Court in September 2025.

Success Narrative
Columbus County was successful in receiving the grant for training and technical assistance through AllRise. The court team will receive the training in August 2025

❖ **Exhibit B, Strategy A2: Treat Opioid Use Disorder: Support and reimburse evidence-based services that adhere to the ASAM continuum of care**

Progress Narrative
Columbus County continues to have limited access to detoxification services, and short or long-term recovery supports for its residents. Through its contractual agreement with The Healing Place of New Hanover County (HPNHC), the county has made significant progress in addressing this challenge. The County contracts for 4314 bed days annually with HPNHC.

Under this agreement, Columbus County residents have immediate, 24/7 access to vital services, including homeless shelter accommodations, social setting detoxification beds, medication assisted treatment (MAT), and short and long-term recovery support. These resources are available to any adult resident of Columbus County who requires this level of assistance and support.

The Healing Place of New Hanover County employs an evidence-based practice model. The addition of MAT to its continuum of care (vivitrol injections) signifies a significant enhancement in residential support. This development allows individuals with an opioid use disorder (OUD) to access residential support services while concurrently receiving MAT, marking a substantial step forward in combating the opioid crisis within Columbus County.

During SFY25, 14 Columbus County residents were admitted to HPNHC for detox and treatment for a total of 753 days of treatment services provided. Of these persons admitted, 8 were men and 6 were women.

Success Narrative
A total of 14 Columbus County residents received treatment at The Healing Place of New Hanover County for a total of 753 treatment days funded during this reporting period.

❖ **Exhibit B, Strategy B7: Support People in Treatment and Recovery: Provide/support transportation to treatment or recovery programs for persons with OUD and any co-occurring SUD/MH conditions**

Progress Narrative
Columbus County again contracted with Healing Hearts Transportation to transport individuals meeting criteria to Dix Facility Based Crisis Center in Jacksonville, North Carolina, Walter B. Jones Hospital in Greenville, North Carolina, or other substance use disorder support services when The Healing Place of New Hanover County is not available or an appropriate placement. Additionally, Columbus County has contracted with Healing Hearts to transport individuals needing transportation to outpatient treatment services.

Success Narrative
Two Columbus County residents were transported to substance use services or crisis stabilization using these funds, when no other transportation was available.

❖ **Exhibit B, Strategy C16: Connect People to the Help They Need: Support centralized call centers that provide information and connections for persons with OUD**

Progress Narrative
Columbus County continues to recognize the critical need for immediate access to opioid use disorder (OUD)/substance use disorder (SUD) and mental health (MH) services within the community. The challenge has not been the absence of services but rather the lack of awareness among residents regarding how to access these vital resources.

To better facilitate access to OUD/SUD/MH treatment services, the County introduced the role of an Opioid/SUD/MH Crisis Coordinator through a contractual position that started May 3, 2023.

One of the standout initiatives is the establishment of a 24/7 crisis phone line, staffed by a Licensed Mental Health Professional (MHP). This phone line is open to anyone in Columbus County facing a crisis and seeking assistance in accessing OUD/SUD/MH treatment services. The crisis phone line has

been promoted across various community touchpoints, including county services, Columbus County Hospital, law enforcement agencies, and local community groups, including churches.

In addition to crisis response, the OUD Crisis Resource Coordinator is actively engaged in compiling and updating a comprehensive resource directory. They are also delivering in-service training sessions to community groups on topics such as the use of naloxone, tackling stigma associated with OUD/ SUD, SBIRT (Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment), and other relevant subjects.

The OUD Crisis Resource Coordinator maintains 24/7 access to The Healing Place of New Hanover County, enabling immediate referrals to this valuable resource. They are equipped to arrange transportation from any location within Columbus County when needed.

Success Narrative
The call center took 58 calls during SFY25 and referred or provided resources to these callers. 54 of these callers were referred for treatment.

❖ Exhibit B, Strategy D3: Address the Needs of Criminal-Justice-Involved Persons: Support treatment and recovery courts that provide evidence-based options

Progress Narrative
During SFY25, Columbus County went through an extensive planning process to initiate an Adult Drug Court in the Columbus County District Court, including an assessment and drug coordination service. The full team was assembled and participated in the planning processes. The Court is slated to start in September 2025.

Success Narrative
The Columbus County Recovery Court team is prepared to begin the recovery court in September 2025.

❖ Exhibit B, Strategy D7: Address the Needs of Criminal-Justice-Involved Persons: Provide training on best practices for addressing the needs of criminal-justice-involved persons

Progress Narrative
During this funding year, a judge and staff person attended the National Drug Court Conference. This conference served as a valuable platform for them to become familiar with evidence-based practice (EBP) models for drug courts and gain insights from the experiences of other judges in preparation for the launch of the Columbus County Recovery Court in September 2025.

Success Narrative
A judge and the Columbus County Recovery Court Coordinator attended the national drug court conference.

❖ Exhibit B, Strategy F4: Ensure Appropriate Prescribing and Dispensing of Opioids: Support for non-opioid pain treatment alternatives, including training providers

Progress Narrative
Training was provided on overprescribing of opioids and alternatives to using pain medications. There are a total of nine training sessions in this series provided to Columbus County Medical Society

Physicians. Five of the training sessions were held in SFY24 and the remaining four sessions were held during this funding period.

Success Narrative
Training was provided to 16 participants and 87.5% of them reported that they learned new information in the trainings. When giving an example of what they plan to change in their daily work/ practice, physicians said the following: “To be more aggressive/proactive in weaning opioids” and “Learned a multitude of ways to treat chronic pain other than opioids.”

❖ Exhibit B, Strategy G1: Prevent Misuse of Opioids: Fund media campaigns to prevent opioid misuse

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This strategy encompassed the creation of a distinctive logo and a diverse range of public messaging tools suitable for deployment on billboards, yard signs, and social media platforms. By taking this approach, Columbus County delivered information and messaging that resonates effectively with its residents. This marketing strategy reflects a commitment to engaging the community in a more compelling and resonant manner. It also underscores the county’s dedication to tackling opioid-related challenges through effective communication and education, ensuring that residents are well-informed and empowered to make positive choices regarding their health and well-being.

The marketing campaign launched in September 2024 and includes billboards, yard signs, posters, brochures, mailings, a website for the campaign, advertising on local radio, and a Facebook page.

Success Narrative
County staff received an email from a Columbus County resident who found the crisis line number from the marketing materials. This email read “I’m writing to extend my deepest thanks to the Columbus County Commissioners and each of you for providing access to critical resources in Columbus County’s Opioid Settlement Program. Because of the resources and systems you’ve put in place, I was able to provide my mother with the 24-hour crisis hotline number so she could share it with a family member in need. That call led to the individual’s admission to the Healing Place of New Hanover County at 3:00 a.m. on Sunday. While we recognize that the road ahead will have its challenges, their family is hopeful and incredibly grateful that access to treatment was available when it was most needed. Because of the systems you’ve worked so hard to establish—through advocacy, coordination, and care—families in Columbus County have access to real solutions in moments of crisis. Please know that your work is making a tangible difference in the lives of those facing addiction and the hearts of the families who love them. Your dedication, coordination, and commitment to creating real avenues for recovery are making a profound difference. Please know that your efforts are seen, valued, and truly impactful.”

❖ **Exhibit B, Strategy G9: Prevent Misuse of Opioids: School-based or youth-focused programs or strategies with demonstrated effectiveness**

Progress Narrative
During SFY25, Columbus County and Whiteville City school systems jointly implemented the Botkin LifeSkills training model at the beginning of the school year with their sixth and seventh-grade students. This ambitious project was introduced to all sixth-grade students starting in the Fall of 2023 and expanded the Level 2 program to seventh graders in Fall of 2024. During this funding year, two additional sixth-grade teachers and eight seventh-grade teachers were trained on the program. 560 students were trained on Level 1 of the program and 553 were trained on Level 2. As students' progress through subsequent grade levels this year, they will continue to benefit from advanced curricula, ensuring program continuity at least until the ninth grade. For SFY2, sixth, seventh, and eighth graders will take the program. Level 1 will be provided to sixth graders, Level 2 will be provided to seventh graders (and some eighth graders who did not complete the curriculum), and Level 3 will be provided to eighth graders. Additionally, the program incorporates an evaluation component that will assess its effectiveness and make necessary improvements.

Success Narrative
10 teachers and 1113 students in the two school systems were trained in this program.

❖ **Exhibit B, Strategy H1: Prevent Overdose Deaths and Other Harm: Increase availability and distribution of naloxone and other drugs that treat overdoses**

Progress Narrative
For several years, Trillium Health Resources has generously provided naloxone to Columbus County's first responders, without any financial burden to the County. Due to the absence of data tracking in the past regarding the usage of naloxone by these first responders, it has been challenging to accurately estimate the required supply for the County.

In FY 2024, a proactive shift in strategy occurred to track the use of naloxone in order to be able to more accurately predict the number of kits needed. The County was able to use the remainder of the kits provided by Trillium Health Resources and also purchased 225 additional kits using settlement funds.

Success Narrative
There were 325 overdoses and 11 fatalities, which means that 314 overdoses were successfully reversed.

❖ **Exhibit B, Strategy H5: Prevent Overdose Deaths and Other Harm: Expand, improve, or develop data tracking software and applications for overdoses/naloxone revivals**

Progress Narrative
Historically, Columbus County has faced a notable challenge in its efforts to track critical information regarding first responders and law enforcement calls related to overdoses, naloxone usage, and naloxone reversals. The County has not had a comprehensive data system for this purpose.

A significant complicating factor is the existence of five separate Emergency Medical Services (EMS) departments, all functioning as sub-contractors, each utilizing distinct software platforms to record their data. During SFY24, funds for this strategy were used to purchase FirstWatch, a database that all

EMS departments will use to track calls and data. Data collection implementation was and continues to be successful and dashboards are being used to collect and analyze data.

The collection of this data is pivotal for several reasons, including accurately predicting the quantity of naloxone required for the County, as well as analyzing the locations of opioid-related overdose incidents and the demographic characteristics of those affected, all in real time.

Success Narrative
The implementation of the software has allowed the collection of data about each of the calls that Emergency Medical Services (EMS) runs. Using this EMS software allows the county to accurately predict the amount of naloxone needed to supply all first responders with an adequate supply. In SFY23, there were 8 deaths among EMS overdose calls. In SFY24, only 3 deaths were among EMS overdose calls. In SFY25, there were 11 deaths among EMS overdose calls. There were 325 suspected overdoses and 83 patients receiving naloxone.

❖ **Exhibit B, Strategy J4: Leadership, Planning, and Coordination: Provide resources to staff government oversight and management of opioid abatement programs**

Progress Narrative
Columbus County ensured responsible management of its opioid settlement funds by appointing an Opioid Settlement Grants Manager prior to this reporting period. This dedicated professional filled crucial responsibilities of collecting, tracking, and reporting on all expenditures associated with the county's opioid settlement funds.

The Grants Manager assumed their role on June 21, 2023, and operates under the direct supervision of the Finance Director of Columbus County. To ensure comprehensive understanding and compliance with the stringent accountability requirements related to the opioid settlement funds, the Grants Manager has actively participated in various online training programs. These training sessions have equipped them with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively oversee and coordinate the County's initiatives tied to these funds.

With the Grants Manager's expertise and commitment, Columbus County has managed its opioid settlement funds efficiently and transparently, furthering the County's efforts to address the opioid crisis.

There has been turnover in this position after the end of SFY24 and a new Grants Manager has been hired and is currently in place.

Success Narrative
The new Grants Manager has expedited the spending and reporting of the funds and reorganized the manner in which funds and outcomes of strategies are tracked and recorded.