

Helping those with opioid addiction and recovery during COVID-19

By Gerri Vaughan, Tufts Health Freedom Plan



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The opioid epidemic is a complex problem that tragically affects far too many people. Some progress has been made: Awareness, funding and treatment options for opioid abuse disorders have increased dramatically, and between 2017 and 2018, the number of deaths due to opioid overdose in the US actually declined for the first time in nearly twenty years.

Unfortunately, many experts fear there will be a spike in drug overdose deaths due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Social isolation, coupled with the stress and uncertainty of the current situation, can exacerbate substance abuse problems. Meanwhile, many of the typical approaches people use to stay on track in recovery — talk therapy, group meetings, medication assistance and exercise — may be unavailable due to recommended stay-at-home precautions for those at higher risk and current social distancing orders.

Fortunately, the entire recovery community, including the behavioral health and recovery care managers of Tufts Health Freedom Plan, is doing everything it can to help people keep up with their recovery programs and get the resources they need. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there are many no cost options for behavioral health visits and telehealth consultations.

If employees or their family members are struggling, help is available

- Many behavioral health providers are offering virtual/telephone sessions.
- Many substance use treatment providers are offering increased online and virtual recovery options. Look for listings of online meetings, communities and other recovery resources.
- Mail order is available for non-controlled substances (e.g. antidepressants) for most individuals who have pharmacy benefits with a mail order option. For Suboxone, pharmacies are still open and dispensing, with many offering drive-through pick-up and others offering delivery service for those at high COVID-19 risk.

Increased awareness has changed past workplace stigmas

While the current pandemic has created challenges for those in treatment and recovery, increased awareness is offering employees and their families more support than ever before.

Efforts like the Recovery Friendly Workplace Initiative introduced by Governor Chris Sununu helped lead a workplace cultural revolution by promoting individual wellness for employees and empowering workplaces to provide support for those recovering from substance use disorders, as well as their family members. The initiative provided employers with the knowledge and tools needed to better understand drug and alcohol addiction and challenge the stigma around it.

Tufts Health Freedom Plan has always made it a priority to support our members, our employees, and the communities we serve who are struggling with opioid use—starting long before the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the past decade, as the opioid crisis has compounded, we've organized multiple teams within Tufts Health Freedom Plan to study, analyze and create effective care solutions for our members who are struggling with opioid addiction.

We created Addiction Recovery Care Management services, staffed with specialized clinicians dedicated to helping members and their families understand addiction, navigate treatment options, and benefits and coverage, and find solutions that fit their situation.

In addition, we've made sure our insurance products cover a broad range of treatment options, including coverage for:

- Inpatient detoxification and acute residential treatment.
- Partial hospital programs and intensive outpatient programs.
- Outpatient therapy and medication management.
- Medication-assisted treatment, including methadone maintenance and prescription of Suboxone.

- Pharmacy coverage for medications used to treat addiction, and for medications that can reverse an opioid overdose at no cost to members.

Gerri Vaughan, president of Tufts Health Freedom Plan has extensive health care experience which includes physician collaboration, governance, market strategy, insurer/provider contract negotiations, risk modeling and managed care operations.

Most recently Vaughan was at Rush Health, a health care system in Chicago, serving as the chief operating officer. Prior to Rush Health, she worked at Circle Health in Lowell, Mass., in roles ranging from senior vice president of network integration to executive director of the physician's organization. Her prior experience also includes provider contracting and performance management roles at Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts and at Tufts Health Plan.



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Tufts Health Freedom Plan Behavioral Health and Addiction Recovery Care Managers are available Monday through Friday for benefit support, navigation, and assistance with locating providers. Call 800-208-9565. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there are no cost shares for behavioral health visits from our network providers and through Teladoc®. Learn more about the behavioral health and recovery resources available from Tufts Health Freedom Plan during the Coronavirus pandemic at <https://thfp.com/covid-19/helpful-resources/overview#bhresources>.