

Center for Rural Health



Comprehensive Center
for Pain & Addiction

Supporting Individuals Experiencing Perinatal Opioid Use Disorder

**A Guide For Community
Health Workers/
Representatives**

The Arizona Center for Rural Health (AzCRH), and Comprehensive Center for Pain and Addiction (CCPA), in collaboration with the Arizona Department of Health Services (ADHS) is implementing training and technical assistance for the Overdose to Data Action – State (OD2A-S) program. AzCRH & CCPA provides professional development content for clinicians, community health workers/ representatives (CHW/Rs), and healthcare professionals. This guide, developed by the Arizona Center for Rural Health (AzCRH), supports community health workers and representatives (CHW/Rs) in offering effective opioid use disorder (OUD) prevention, harm reduction, treatment, and recovery, during the perinatal period. The commitment of CHW/Rs is critical to improving access to care and health outcomes for individuals experiencing perinatal opioid use disorder.

Understanding the Perinatal Period

The perinatal period includes pregnancy and the first year after birth. During this time, people using or misusing opioids may be at increased risk for complications, including preterm birth, neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS), and mental health challenges.¹ The care they receive is often shaped not just by their health conditions, but by stigma, systemic racism, criminalization, and a lack of trust in health systems. These realities can lead to delayed or inadequate care, and unfortunately, worse outcomes.²

Providers often report that patients with substance use concerns have complex health needs that stretch beyond the expertise of a single practitioner.³ When bias, fear of child welfare involvement, or judgmental language enters the care space, it can create even more distance between someone and the support they need.^{4,5,6,7} Across the country, inconsistent practices and limited culturally responsive training only widen these gaps in care.⁸

Still, there is so much potential in this window of time. Pregnancy and early parenting can be a powerful motivator for people to engage in care and make meaningful change. As CHW/Rs, your grounded presence can offer hope, connection, and continuity when the rest of the system may feel overwhelming.

Why is Maternal and Infant Health Important?

When we support maternal and infant health, we support families, futures, and entire communities. But not everyone has equal access to quality care, especially people navigating substance use, poverty, or systemic harm. Black, Indigenous, and Latiné parents face higher rates of pregnancy complications and infant mortality, in part due to systemic racism, under-resourced healthcare systems, and implicit bias.^{4,8} Research shows that high-quality, affirming prenatal and postpartum care can reduce preventable risks and help birthing families thrive.^{1,9}

This guide presents resources and recommendations for:

ACTIONABLE STEPS FOR CHW/Rs

aligned with Arizona Department of Health Services (ADHS) Community Health Worker Core Competencies.

USING PERSON-FIRST AND GENDER-AFFIRMING LANGUAGE

ACCESSING SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES



Actionable Steps for CHW/Rs:

Action		Aligned core competencies:	Next Steps
Implement Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT):	The SBIRT approach helps CHW/Rs identify people at risk for substance use disorders and connect them to services early. When adapted to the perinatal setting, it can be a compassionate way to introduce care without judgment. Recent studies have shown that SBIRT can effectively support pregnant individuals with substance use needs and increase engagement in services. ¹⁰	Health education for behavior change; Referrals and providing follow-up.	Learn more: SAMHSA SBIRT Overview
Deliver Trauma-Informed Perinatal Support	Trauma-informed care (TIC) in perinatal settings acknowledges how past harm, including racism, poverty, or sexual trauma, shapes someone’s experience with pregnancy, birth, and healthcare. Incorporating TIC helps reduce fear and shame and supports longer-term engagement. ^{13,14,15} CHW/Rs can help model and advocate for TIC across clinical and non-clinical settings.	Health literacy & cross-cultural communication; Individual support and coaching.	Learn more: SAMHSA Trauma Resources
Normalize and Reframe Early-Pregnancy Substance Use	Many people discover they were pregnant only after using alcohol or other drugs, which can trigger deep guilt, embarrassment, or fears of being judged. CHW/Rs can help by (a) validating those feelings (“You didn’t have all the information then, and you’re taking care of yourself and baby now”); (b) shifting the focus to present-moment supports: prenatal vitamins, OUD treatment, harm-reduction supplies; (c) using motivational-interviewing questions (“What feels most important for you and your baby over the next week?”); and (d) offering warm referrals to perinatal mental-health or peer circles so parents can process guilt in a non-punitive space. ¹⁶	Individual support and coaching; Communication skills.	Refer patients to: Postpartum Support International (PSI) HelpLine — 1-800-944-4773 (TEXT 503-894-9453), more information found here: https://apal.arizona.edu/perinatal Trained volunteers return calls within 24 hours, provide brief emotional support, and connect callers to local, perinatal-mental-health–informed resources, including clinicians and peer groups that specialize in substance use during pregnancy and postpartum.
Include Harm Reduction as a Care Practice:	Harm reduction approaches, like offering naloxone, supporting safer use practices, and validating each person’s goals, are linked to better maternal and neonatal outcomes. Harm reduction also affirms the dignity and autonomy of birthing people who use substances. Recent evidence highlights how integrating harm reduction in perinatal care improves engagement and reduces overdose risks. ^{17,18}	Individual support and coaching; Client and community assessment.	
Integrate Community-Based Doula Programs:	Doulas provide emotional, physical, and informational support during pregnancy, birth, and the early postpartum period. Studies show that doulas can lower the rates of complications and interventions, especially among people who have been historically underserved. ^{17,18}	Service coordination & navigation of resources; Cultural mediation between communities and health systems.	DONA International : Directory of certified doulas across the U.S., explanations of what birth and postpartum doulas do, and training opportunities. Perinatal Mental Health Provider Directory : A searchable directory of professionals who support perinatal mental health, including doulas, therapists, psychiatrists, and support groups. You can filter by specialty (e.g., birth trauma, substance use, postpartum depression), language, and location—including Arizona. Arizona Doula Directory (via Arizona Breastfeeding Coalition) : Listings of doulas across Arizona, plus training and support options. Collaborate Across Sectors for Whole-Person Care : Collaboration between healthcare, housing, public health, and peer support teams results in more holistic care. A stepped-care model in perinatal OUD treatment—one that includes CHWs and community-based support, has shown promise in improving continuity of care and family outcomes. ¹ Aligned core competencies: Client and community assessment; Provide direct services. Learn more: Perinatal Toolkit by Krans et al. (2024)

What is a doula?

A doula is a trained professional who provides continuous emotional, physical, and informational support before, during, and shortly after childbirth. They are non-clinical and do not replace doctors or midwives.

Action		Aligned core competencies:	Next Steps
Ensure Access to Culturally Responsive Care:	Partner with local organizations to provide care tailored to diverse cultural needs. Whenever possible, refer clients to providers and programs that honor their language, culture, history, and lived experience. This helps reduce re-traumatization and improves long-term engagement. ^{2,8}	Cultural competence & responsiveness; Service coordination.	
Expand Education on Implicit Bias:	Offer training or resources that help your team recognize how bias, especially around race, class, and substance use, can shape care decisions. These patterns are often unconscious, but their effects are very real. ⁴	Health literacy & cross-cultural communication; Advocacy & capacity building	See AzMAT Mentors Program Quick Guide #3: Reducing Substance Use Disorder Stigma
Lead Stigma-Reduction through Peer Supports:	Connect clients with peer-led warm-lines or support groups, such as Postpartum Support International-AZ or the Birth-to-Five Help-line and share public, lived-experience stories that re-frame substance use and mental health as treatable, non-moral issues. State recommendations highlight stigma campaigns and peer networks as key to engagement and maternal-health equity. ¹⁹	Community outreach & engagement; Health education for behavior change.	Read Arizona Department of Health Services. Maternal Mental Health- and Substance Use-Related Deaths in Arizona. Arizona Department of Health Services, Mar. 2022.
Promote Access to Financial and Logistical Support:	Barriers like transportation, food, housing, and childcare can prevent people from accessing healthcare. Your support in connecting folks to wraparound services can make a major difference in outcomes. ²	Support, advocacy & health-system navigation	See AzCRH's Guides and Manuals: Substance Use Treatment Resources by County https://crh.arizona.edu/publications/guides-manuals
Continuing Education:	Stay curious and connected to the evolving needs of your community. CHW/Rs are often the first to witness where systems are falling short. Your observations matter and they can inform better care for everyone.	Reflective practice; Continuing professional development	

Know Your Arizona Legal Landscape:

Action		Aligned core competencies:	Next Steps
Mandatory Substance Exposed Newborns (SEN) reporting & Infant Care Plans:	Arizona law (§ 8-201 (25)(c)) requires any professional who “reasonably believes” a newborn was prenatally exposed to alcohol or drugs to call the DCS Hotline (1-888-SOS-CHILD). Every infant exposed to substances must also leave the hospital with an Infant Care Plan that lists medical follow-ups, safe-sleep guidance, and parent supports; CHW/Rs should verify the plan and help families carry it out. ²⁰		See Mandatory Reporting of Substance Exposed Newborns, https://dcs.az.gov/resource/brochure
Prescription-Drug Monitoring Program (PDMP):	State guidance urges all perinatal providers to run PDMP checks and flag worrisome scripts for a care-manager warm hand-off. CHW/Rs can remind clients to keep an updated medication list and consent for PDMP queries when needed. ¹⁶		Read Arizona Department of Health Services. Maternal Mental Health- and Substance Use-Related Deaths in Arizona. Arizona Department of Health Services, Mar. 2022. Appendix D.
Naloxone Standing Order & Good-Samaritan Protections:	Arizona's Opioid Action Plan backs pharmacy standing-order naloxone and shields bystanders who administer it from prosecution. Encourage families to pick up free or low-cost kits and train support persons on use. ¹⁹	Professional skills & conduct; Legal and ethical responsibilities	Read Arizona Department of Health Services. Maternal Mental Health- and Substance Use-Related Deaths in Arizona. Arizona Department of Health Services, Mar. 2022. Appendix D.
Advocate for Non-Punitive, Rights-Based Policies:	Punitive responses to substance use during pregnancy, like Child Protective Services involvement or criminalization, discourage people from seeking care. CHW/Rs can advocate for policies that protect birthing people from discrimination and ensure that care is centered on healing and family preservation. ¹	Advocacy & community engagement; Policy and systems change	

Using person-first and gender-affirming language²⁰
Pregnancy can be experienced by women, transgender men, and non-binary folks. Being aware of a person’s gender identity and offering gender-affirming care is important for person-centered care.²² This involves asking patients about their gender identity, preferred pronouns, and using appropriate and inclusive words. The use of inclusive language helps enhance patient-provider relationships for positive health outcomes. Here are some examples of person-first and gender affirming language.

Pregnancy	Use terms such as a “parent who is expecting,” “parent experiencing pregnancy,” “patient who is pregnant,” and/or “patient in labor” alongside women-centered language.	
Feeding	Use terms such as “parent who is chest feeding,” or “body feeding” alongside the term woman who is breastfeeding ^{22,23}	
Person-first and gender-neutral terms	These terms can be used alongside can be used alongside woman-centered language, such as:	• Women and people who are pregnant • Women and people who are birthing • Women and people who are breast/chest feeding • Women and people who are in postnatal period
Person-first language	when discussing substance use. When discussing substance use consider reviewing these resources:	Addictionary developed by the Recovery Research Institute, click here: https://tinyurl.com/addiction-ary ‘Words Matter’ developed by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, click here: https://tinyurl.com/words-matter-NIDA



Additional Resources

Academy of Perinatal Harm Reduction – Provider Education + Training, click here: <https://tinyurl.com/perinatal-ed>

AzCRH Perinatal Mental Health Support – resources for Birthing Parents & Families – hotlines, peer groups, therapy directories. crh.arizona.edu/perinatal-mental-health-support-resources-birthing-parents-and-families

AzCRH Perinatal Mental Health Support – resources for Healthcare Professionals – training, toolkits, referral lists. <https://crh.arizona.edu/perinatal-mental-health-support-resources-healthcare-professionals>

AzCRH Substance Use Treatment Resource Cards by County – printable one-pagers listing local harm-reduction, SUD, and social-service contacts. <https://crh.arizona.edu/publications/guides-manuals>

Arizona Department of Health Services – Continuing Education for Community Health Workers (core competencies and approved trainings). <https://www.azdhs.gov/licensing/blpo/index.php#chw-continuing-education>

Arizona Poison & Drug Information Center (APAL) – 24/7 clinician hotline for medication, overdose, and toxic-exposure guidance. <https://azpoison.com>

Arizona Department of Health Services – opioid prevention resources and education, click here: <https://www.azdhs.gov/opioid/#community>

CDC: Treatment for Opioid Use Disorder Before, During, and after Pregnancy, click here: https://www.cdc.gov/opioid-use-during-pregnancy/treatment/?CDC_AAref_Val=https://www.cdc.gov/pregnancy/opioids/treatment.html

Community Health Worker Impact on Knowledge, Antenatal Care, and Birth Outcomes – research study. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10995-021-03299-w>

Comprehensive Center for Pain and Addiction <https://painandaddiction.arizona.edu/clinical/NAS-program>

Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center - Prenatal Substance Exposure & Early Identification, guidance on screening, referral, IDEA Part C eligibility, and family-centered practices. <https://ectacenter.org/topics/earlyid/prenatalsubstances.asp>

Fourth Trimester Arizona – community-based postpartum-care collective (douglas, lactation, mental health). <https://4thtrimesteraz.org>

Guide to accurate and compassionate communications on drug and alcohol use during pregnancy, click here: <https://bixbycenter.ucsf.edu/guide-accurate-and-compassionate-communications-drug-and-alcohol-use-during-pregnancy>

Importance of Community Health Workers for Maternal Health Care Management – review article. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10917972/>

National Partnership for Women & Families – Maternal Health Bulletin, click here: <https://tinyurl.com/perinatal-care>

MotherToBaby – Evidence-based information on various exposures during pregnancy and breastfeeding. Services are free support those who are pregnant and/or breastfeeding, families and health professionals. <https://mothertobaby.org/>

OAR Line – free, confidential, 24/7 help with opioids from certified experts. Call 1-888-688-4222 or visit <https://www.azdhs.gov/oarline/>

Pregnancy and Substance Use: A Harm Reduction Toolkit – National Harm Reduction Coalition guide for providers and advocates. <https://harmreduction.org/issues/pregnancy-and-substance-use-a-harm-reduction-toolkit/>

SAMHSA – Clinical Guidance for Treating Pregnant and Parenting Women with Opioid Use Disorder and Their Infants,: <https://library.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/sma18-5054.pdf>

Rural Health Information Hub – provides examples of models addressing OUD in pregnant women, click here: <https://tinyurl.com/rural-maternal>

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This resource builds upon the work originally developed through the AzMAT Mentors Program.

Mendivil E, Murphy BS, Brady B. AzMAT Mentors Program Provider Collaboration Quick Guide 4: Treating Perinatal Opioid Use Disorder (OUD). The University of Arizona Center for Rural Health, January 2023.

Recommended Citation: Mendivil E, Murphy BS. Supporting Individuals Experiencing Perinatal Opioid Use Disorder: A Guide for CHW/Rs. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Center for Rural Health; September 1, 2025



We respectfully acknowledge the University of Arizona is on the land and territories of Indigenous peoples. Today, Arizona is home to 22 federally recognized tribes, with Tucson being home to the O’odham and the Yaqui. The University strives to build sustainable relationships with sovereign Native Nations and Indigenous communities through education offerings, partnerships, and community service.

Disclaimers:

This publication was made possible by funding support from the Arizona Department of Health Services (ADHS) through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) Overdose Data to Action in States (OD2A-S) cooperative agreement grant number CDC-RFA-CE23-2301). The content presented is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily reflect the views, opinions or policies of ADHS or the CDC.

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