

CAPE COD TIMES

NEWS

Street drugs now laced with animal tranquilizers in MA: How labs test on Cape Cod.



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Key Points AI-assisted summary ⓘ

A Massachusetts community drug testing program, MADDs, is helping reduce overdose deaths by analyzing the changing composition of street drugs.

The program uses test strips and spectrometers to identify drug contents, including fentanyl and other additives like xylazine and medetomidine.

Testing sites including on Cape Cod provide anonymous drug checking and connect users with harm reduction resources and treatment options.

A community drug testing program started six years ago in Massachusetts has helped reduce overdose deaths but the program continues to evolve as [opioid drug](#) contents are changing.

Traci Green started the first statewide community drug-checking program in the United States called [Massachusetts Drug Supply Data Stream \(MADDs\) in 2019](#). She also runs the [Opioid Policy Research Collaborative](#) at The Heller School for Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University in Waltham.

“The drug supply now is extremely variable,” Green said in an online interview with the Times on July 24. “There are many, many, many additives now,” she said. “It used to be only fentanyl. Now there is only a little fentanyl.”

“We’re trying to learn about the new substances,” Green said, as the other additives can have different health effects.

The goal of the program is to learn more about the local illicit drug supply to better inform public health, public safety and policy decisions, according to the website. The program is a state-funded collaboration between the university, state public health officials, harm reduction community groups and town police departments.

Testing thousands of drug samples

In test sites in 20 communities across Massachusetts, including on Cape Cod, Green's team has tested thousands of drug samples using a combination of low-tech test strips and 12 high-tech spectrometers. The testing equipment is housed in harm reduction programs at local health agencies.

One testing site, [Health Imperatives in Hyannis](#), is where Jesse Pack, director of the nonprofit's harm reduction program, demonstrated recently how the testing procedures work using tiny voluntary samples of a drug from a client that's not usable.

For the test strips only for fentanyl, a tiny powdered sample is dipped into a small amount of water and the strip is inserted. It will indicate almost immediately a positive or negative result. The clinics give out hundreds of the test strips to clients to do their own testing, Pack said.

Pack showed the high-tech testing with a compact spectrometer, placing a small drug sample on a metal plate over a tiny opening with a crystal inside, covering it with foil and pressing down with an anvil. An infrared laser is shot into the sample and the drug contents can be seen on a connected laptop computer within 30 minutes, Pack said.

Results also are sent to a regional lab for more extensive testing and are available in about two weeks.

"We want to test to make sure there are no other drugs," Pack said. Two of the most common additives currently are [xylazine](#) and [medetomidine](#), which are tranquilizers used by veterinarians. It extends the effect of the drugs, he said.

The testing program at Health Imperatives at 1019 Route 132 in Hyannis is available Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. and Tuesday to 6:30 p.m. People can pick up test strips or drop off samples, which will be sealed for the testing, office manager Dinalva Rodrigues said.

People can go to one of the testing sites, either a mobile van or a building. All testing is anonymous, Green said.

Why would anyone test their drugs for contents?

When people find out a drug, such as fentanyl or cocaine, is contaminated, some will stop using and go into treatment, Pack said.

“The good news is they are using this service,” he said. “They get a better idea of what they are putting in their body.”

The in-person testing also gives the testers an opportunity to talk with a person and share the results that can help the user understand the risks and make decisions, Green and Pack both said.

Pack said drug overdoses are down nationwide by 30% for various reasons, such as the use of Narcan and expanded treatments, but six people still die every day in Massachusetts from drug overdoses.

“Overdose deaths reduced statewide and nationwide has a lot to do with the support and with the supply,” Green said. Less fentanyl in the drugs has reduced overdoses by a quarter to a third, she said.

How many opioid related deaths in Barnstable County?

The state Department of Public Health overdose deaths dashboard has reported all substance abuse deaths by state, county or city for the last six years. The latest data from July 2023 to June 2024 showed a statewide total of 3,692 substance related deaths, including 1,763 opioid related deaths, down from 2,317 the previous year.

Barnstable County data from the health department in 2023-24 showed 140 substance abuse deaths and 61 opioid related deaths, a decrease from the previous year of 191 substance abuse deaths and 79 opioid related. The high point of opioid deaths in Barnstable County was 95 in 2021-22.

“Overdoses are one of the things we are thinking about,” Green said. “We have to get to people before they overdose.” If people come to the testing sites with various drug-related physical conditions, they can be monitored, she said.

[Xylazine](#), for example, can exhibit wounds that are hard to heal and are hard to look at, causing a stigma, Green said.

“Stigma is the biggest challenge,” she said.

Embracing drug checks on Cape Cod

“Organizations on the Cape have embraced the drug checks,” Green said, and she would like them to encourage more Cape residents to use the services. “The real problem is overdose; people we’re losing are not committed to services.”

Statewide, the MADDs testing service sees about 200 to 250 people every day, Green said and one-quarter to one-third of those have not used it before.

She said this type of testing is a more efficient use of opioid funds, but drug funding could be at risk with the federal cuts.

2025: [Regional health organization loses Medicaid funding for thousands of low-income residents](#)

Massachusetts laws now allow public access to information from the public health services that provide drug testing. Green said, but no names are ever used and none of the information gathered goes to the courts.

Green said all drug testing information was only with the police for a long time.

“We lost so many people,” she said. “It was not OK that it was only in the hands of law enforcement.”

[Access Hope mobile van](#) also the harm reduction testing in all Cape towns on a weekly schedule. Visit the website [Ahopecc.org](#).

AIDS Support Group of Cape Cod has a separate program using test strips for fentanyl as well as a drug checking machine that provides more in-depth information on other drugs. All services are free. The website is [asgcc.org](#).

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