



Pennsylvania
Department of Drug and
Alcohol Programs



Pennsylvania
Department of Aging

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Shapiro Administration Launches New Initiative to Lower Number of Fatal Overdoses Among PA's Older Adults

*Shapiro Administration is piloting an evidence-based initiative in **four counties** designed to decrease overdose death rates in older adults.*

*Funding to implement the initiative is provided from the "Big Four" opioid settlement, which was the result of a multistate investigation of opioid manufacturers and distributors spearheaded by **Governor Josh Shapiro** when he was Attorney General.*

New Castle, PA – Today, the **Pennsylvania departments of Drug and Alcohol Programs (DDAP)** and **Aging (PDA)** announced the launch of the **Shapiro Administration's** new initiative to help lower the number of fatal overdoses in older adults in Pennsylvania – a number that has increased over the past few years.

The agencies are implementing an evidence-based substance use prevention and wellness program called the **Wellness Initiative for Senior Education (WISE)** across four counties with some of the highest rates of overdoses for Pennsylvanians 55 and older.

Funding to implement the WISE initiative is provided from the "Big Four" opioid settlement, which was the result of a multistate investigation of opioid manufacturers and distributors spearheaded by **Governor Josh Shapiro** when he was Attorney General. It led to multiple settlement agreements worth billions of dollars to expand or enhance recovery support services for individuals in recovery from opioid use disorder and other substance use disorders (SUD), most of which goes directly to Pennsylvania counties to meet local needs.

"The WISE program reflects the Shapiro Administration's shared commitment to health equity, improving health outcomes, and working together to better the lives of Pennsylvania's older adults," said **DDAP Secretary Dr. Latika Davis-Jones**. "Meeting people where they are is a cornerstone of our prevention, treatment, and recovery services. Partnering with local organizations and integrating this initiative into trusted systems already in place is key to providing effective, accessible prevention."

WISE is a national program that has been operating since 1996 to address the risks specific to older adults related to substance use. It covers a range of topics including stress management, strategies for healthy living, medication management, alcohol use disorder, the aging process, and prescription drugs. WISE uses an interactive approach to help older adults celebrate aging, make positive lifestyle choices, and feel more confident and in control of their lives.

“During the development of *Aging Our Way, PA*, Pennsylvania’s 10-year strategic plan for aging, we heard directly from older adults, caregivers, and direct care workers about an issue that doesn’t get talked about: behavioral health and substance use challenges among older adults. We heard clearly from older adults that they need more accessible prevention, education, and community-based supports tailored to their unique needs,” said **PDA Secretary Jason Kavulich**. “Thanks to our partnership with Secretary Davis-Jones and the team at DDAP, our WISE pilot is a model for how Pennsylvania can lead in supporting healthy, safe, and connected aging. By aligning prevention with the goals of *Aging Our Way, PA*, the Shapiro Administration is delivering a proactive approach that reduces isolation and stigma and meets older adults where they are in their communities.”

Pennsylvania’s older adult population continues to grow, underscoring the need for prevention services tailored to aging adults. According to the Pennsylvania Department of Health’s [most recent data](#), nearly 600 Pennsylvanians aged 55 and older died from an overdose – accounting for 18 percent of all overdoses – in 2024 in Pennsylvania. Risk factors for overdose or developing an SUD in older adults include changes in metabolism, chronic physical health conditions, and coping styles for grief and loss.

Partnerships to Support Healthy Aging

Based on a number of criteria, including the rates of overdoses, the Shapiro Administration is piloting the program with area agencies on aging (AAA) in four counties throughout 2026: Berks, Chester, Lawrence, and Lehigh counties. During this pilot period, the Shapiro Administration estimates more than 100 older adults will attend WISE sessions in their respective county.

“Lawrence County has historically had one of the highest overdose rates in Pennsylvania, and we are seeing this concern increase among older adults,” said **Lawrence County Area Agency on Aging Administrator Amy Cervone**. “WISE helps older adults better understand how the body changes with age and how prescription and non-prescription medications can affect health, safety, and overall well-being. Many older adults in our community have questions about medication impacts and side effects. Through this program, participants will gain practical tools to make positive life choices and feel more in control of their lives.”

In Lawrence County, the initiative was developed in collaboration with the Lawrence County AAA and the support of Lawrence County Drug and Alcohol Commission, Inc. – the local administrator for substance use prevention programs. The Lawrence County AAA will hold their first session on Wednesday, July 8 from 9 a.m. – 11 a.m.

“With this launch, WISE has the potential to reduce the stigma surrounding older adults seeking treatment for substance use disorders and to strengthen collaboration between our local agencies,” said **Lawrence County Drug and Alcohol Commission Executive Director Rebecca Abramson**.

How WISE Will Work in PA

- A minimum of two facilitators from each AAA will be trained to administer WISE.
- The counties’ AAA will hold six weekly WISE learning sessions at local senior centers and with older adult groups in their county.
- Each session will be about two hours.
- Participants will be surveyed both before and after each of the six sessions to measure knowledge changes.

“The older adults who are struggling with substance use disorder are often invisible to the systems designed to help,” said **Reverend Robert Fuller, a withdrawal management counselor and older adult in recovery**. “I am grateful to the Commonwealth for seeing this population, for refusing to leave them behind, and for building something that could reach the person I used to be.”

Older adults who are residents of any of the four pilot counties and interested in enrolling in WISE sessions can do so by contacting the local [AAA](#).

Learn more about the Shapiro Administration’s overdose prevention efforts at ddap.pa.gov.

EDITOR NOTE: Photos and video of the event are available through [PA Cast](#).

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