

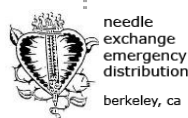
# EAST BAY DRUG CHECKING COLLABORATIVE:

## Lessons learned from collaborative drug checking services

### East Bay Drug Checking Collaborative (EBDC): An Overview

#### How was EBDC formed?

In 2023, Alameda County funded the HIV Education Prevention Project of Alameda County (HEPPAC) to launch FTIR and other drug checking services. To support drug checking across the county, HEPPAC joined forces with Punks with Lunch and NEED (Needle Exchange Emergency Distribution) to form the East Bay Drug Checking Collaborative (EBDC)—the **1<sup>st</sup> formal drug-checking collaboration of its kind** in the U.S.



#### Why is drug checking important?

- Drug checking is a harm reduction tool that allows people who use drugs (PWUD) the ability to test their drugs, using multiple technologies. EBDC utilizes both test strips (fentanyl, xylazine and benzo), a Fourier-transform infrared (FTIR) spectroscopy machine and confirmatory testing in a lab.
- By knowing what is in their drugs, people can have autonomy to make informed decisions to meet their health and wellness goals and reduce the harms created by prohibition and racialized drug policies.

#### Why collaborative drug checking?



**Feasibility.** More access to drug checking infrastructure since its costly and time intensive.



**Reach.** More people receive drug checking services through different SSP networks.



**Peer-to-Peer Learning.** Different agencies learn from each other; smaller agencies can learn to navigate County funding norms and compliance, while larger agencies can learn from collective leadership models.

### The challenges of collaborative drug-checking

While innovative, EBDC's collaborative work has not been without challenges. Most lessons learned have related to the need to level setting expectations across the organizations' different approaches to harm reduction work and different internal structures.



Some organizations were large with paid staff, while others were grassroots and volunteer-driven.



Some had more hierarchical decision-making infrastructures, while others were consensus-based.



The staff and volunteers had diverse lived experiences related to racial identities, drug use, among others.

The conflicts that have emerged following EBDC formation, or **“storming”**<sup>1</sup>, have been a natural, yet grueling part of the collaborative development process. This is a common reality in coalition building, and important to understand when building these collaboratives

The next page highlights specific lessons learned about how harm reduction organizations might learn from storming to improve collaboration in group initiatives.

1. A term used in Bruce Tuckman's original model for stages of team development

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### Lessons Learned and Insights for the Future

1



#### Explicitly define roles, responsibilities, and power-sharing across agencies.

At first, the scope of each EBDC agency was not clearly defined. This led to misalignment about how power would be shared. As a result, some members felt confused, unheard, or unable to contribute, and many members felt frustrated.

#### EBDC Example Practice

EBDC developed formal memoranda of understanding (MOUs) and subcontracts to clarify expectations around each agency's role and responsibilities.

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#### Proactively address issues related to racial dynamics and lived experience.

It was important to create space to address realities related to racial dynamics and lived experience within EBDC, such as (i) being a Black person generationally impacted by drugs and the war on drugs, or (ii) being a person who uses drugs who is often treated as chaotic or disposable, even among harm reductionists.

#### EBDC Example Practice

EBDC used the support of a trained external facilitator who had expertise in the dynamics of the harm reduction movement and experience addressing the diverse lived experiences in the group.

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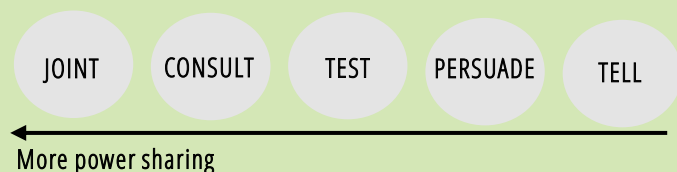


#### Establish shared decision-making and communication norms upfront.

EBDC did not begin with a shared decision-making framework, with each agency making assumptions about how decisions would be made and how disagreements would be handled based on their own decision-making norms and culture. This halted progress on the collaborative work and led to frustration.

#### EBDC Example Practices

The **decision-making spectrum** (Management Change Center) gives transparency to the amount of power a group has in a decision, ranging from "joint" (equally shared power) to "tell" (no power sharing).



**Fist to Five Voting** is a consent-based decision making process in which individuals use fingers to communicate agreement with a decision.



Fingers prompt discussion; decision passes when everyone has 3+

### THE BIG PICTURE

Harm reductionists often share core values but center them via different lenses, experiences, and capacities. Each of these perspectives are valuable.

Despite ongoing differences, EBDC has created opportunities for deeper collaboration and learning among harm reduction agencies, which has helped EBDC launch drug checking services across Alameda County, be successfully trained in FTIR by Remedy Alliance, across Alameda County, and tailor drug checking approaches and services to each agency's context