Introduction

What a long way we have come!

Just over a year ago, in June of 2019, The SOAR Initiative was formed by a group of six undergraduate students at The Ohio State University. We were drawn together by a desire to help our community and a mutual interest in the opioid crisis, one of the great issues facing Central Ohio.

None of us could have imagined where we would be today. We’ve formed partnerships with community and governmental organizations, we’ve fundraised for our Fentanyl Test Strip distributions and Deadly Batch Alerts, we’ve welcomed four new capable and passionate team members, and most importantly we’ve talked with dozens of fellow Central Ohioans about the opioid crisis and the lifesaving meaning of harm reduction.

There is still so much work to be done. Hundreds of Central Ohioans and thousands of Americans are still dying each year from completely preventable drug overdoses. They are met most often by their governmental representatives, their healthcare professionals, and their communities with stigma and blame for their disease. Drug overdose deaths are up well over 50% this year in Franklin County, a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and new, dangerous trends in the drug supply.

We repeat our call for drug addiction to be recognized as a disease. We repeat our call for a compassionate and people-centered approach to those who suffer from it. We repeat our call for the decriminalization of drug use and for the guarantee of a safe supply and safe consumption for all. And we promise to continue working to ensure that all Central Ohioans are informed about the choices they make and that as many as possible stay with us.

“The opposite of addiction isn’t sobriety. It’s connection.”

-Johann Hari
Membership and Personnel

As of August 1, 2019 The SOAR Initiative counted six members. All six were co-founders and members of the inaugural Executive Board.

As of July 31, 2020 The SOAR Initiative counted ten members. Four new members had joined over the course of the year, bringing with them their passion and unique expertise.

Throughout the summer of 2020, The SOAR Initiative began a process of organizational restructuring. The Executive Board increased in size to allow for community leaders to take on an oversight role in the organization, and a system of Divisions was created to manage daily operations. An Executive Director reports directly to the Executive Board and coordinates the work of the Directors of each of the four Divisions: Technology, Research, Community Relations, and Operations.

Currently, The SOAR Initiative is looking to expand further. We will soon hire our first paid employees and we continue to search for passionate community stakeholders interested in joining our Executive Board.

Executive Director: Pranav Padmanabhan, pranav@thesoarinitiative.org
Director of Technology: Joe Esposito, joe@thesoarinitiative.org
Director of Research: Varshita Chirumamilla, varshita@thesoarinitiative.org
Director of Community Relations: Dennis Pales, dennis@thesoarinitiative.org
Director of Operations: Larkin Cleland, larkin@thesoarinitiative.org
The SOAR Initiative began the 2019-2020 Fiscal Year with no assets apart from an in-kind donation of Fentanyl Test Strips by another nonprofit, Cover2 Resources.

In November 2019, The SOAR Initiative pitched for the Tech Hub Student Project Grant and was selected to receive our first grant of $3,000. The same month, we launched a crowdfunding campaign that has raised over $600 to date.

This year, The SOAR Initiative was also officially designated by the Internal Revenue Service as a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) nonprofit. All donations to The SOAR Initiative are now tax-deductible.

Since securing initial funding, our focus has turned to the future. The opioid crisis shows no signs of ending and is in fact accelerating in Ohio. We need to guarantee that Fentanyl Test Strips will be available for everyone who needs them into the future, and that Deadly Batch Alerts will continue to inform the community when dangerous drugs are found.

The biggest step in guaranteeing sustainability and continuation of our programs is our recent partnership with Columbus Public Health and the Columbus and Franklin County Addiction Plan. Worth up to $48,000 over the course of the 2020-2021 Fiscal Year, the partnership provides us with the resources to develop and maintain both our Deadly Batch Alerts and a mobile app, to conduct outreach by way of greatly expanded Fentanyl Test Strip distribution, and to welcome new passionate people to our team on a part-time basis.
Programming and Progress

Our work has advanced on nearly every front this year. From our technology to our research, we have laid the groundwork for the coming year, when we can truly get down to the business of giving back to our Central Ohio community.

Early this year, we began preparations for our primary Fentanyl Test Strip distribution site at Faith Mission shelter in downtown Columbus. This pilot program includes distribution of Fentanyl Test Strips to those who need them most, but it is also designed to add to the body of knowledge about the effectiveness of Fentanyl Test Strips in helping people who use drugs do so more safely. Under the auspices of the Institutional Review Board at The Ohio State University, participants regularly take surveys about how the results of their Test Strips affect their behavior.

We have also arranged multiple secondary Fentanyl Test Strip distributions sites which will open in the near future, in addition to supplying existing community groups and organizations with Fentanyl Test Strips.

Fentanyl Test Strips save lives. But we are multiplying the lifesaving power of the Test Strips we distribute by connecting them to our Deadly Batch Alert system. Users can anonymously and securely report back the results of their Test Strips, allowing new text alerts for contaminated drugs to be sent out to their community before overdoses take lives. Within just a few weeks of its launch, our Deadly Batch Alert system had gained over 100 users. These community members are already receiving SMS text alerts from public health officials and the community alike.

The Deadly Batch Alert system will soon be joined by a complementary mobile app. In addition to displaying all current and past alerts and providing another place for users to submit their own anonymous and secure reports, the app will connect users to harm reduction and treatment resources. We plan to make the app available to those with limited access to technology on fixed-location devices at partner locations like Safe Point Syringe Access Program. We believe that all Central Ohioans deserve to be able to make informed and safe choices, and our programming supports this aspiration.
Partners

THE CITY OF COLUMBUS
ANDREW J. GINTHER, MAYOR
COLUMBUS PUBLIC HEALTH

LSS FAITH MISSION
Homeless Shelter & Services

SAFE POINT

COVER2 RESOURCES
LIVE FREE.

BHR

FRANKLIN COUNTY OPIATE ACTION PLAN
Building the Bridge to Tomorrow

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF PUBLIC HEALTH