

Summary of Findings - Policy Codesign to Improve Interactions Between Law Enforcement and People Who Use Drugs



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Key Findings

- Our study examined participants' perceptions of a policy co-design process to improve interactions between law enforcement and people who use drugs.
- We found that most participants hoped to create change in their community and that many agreed that as a result of the co-design process, they were able to progress toward change.
- Participants were surprised by the high level of engagement from other participants, especially participants who were law enforcement officers.
- Although participants liked many aspects of the facilitation, they provided resounding feedback that future co-design sessions should be facilitated in person.
- The majority of participants reported no conflict, with a few instances of conflict centering around different perspectives and stigmatizing language and beliefs.
- Participants across Yakima, Thurston, and Clallam regions were asked about the acceptability and feasibility of the independent pilot solutions that they developed through the process. Yakima chose to continue conversations through coalition meetings, Thurston implemented a letter-writing program in jails, and Clallam piloted officer wellness sessions and created a video showcasing success stories in their community.
- Participants expressed interest in disseminating their experiences from the co-design process with other sites, future co-design participants, stakeholders in the local community, and others.
- The internal team agreed that the co-design process should remain local and allow sites to take ownership of their solutions. Future co-design processes should continue to prioritize the needs, values, and interests of the local community.

Study Details

Study Description: A policy co-design process to improve interactions between law enforcement and people with lived experience of substance use was conducted across three counties in Washington State: Yakima County, Clallam County, and Thurston County. These results come from a qualitative study that evaluated the policy co-design process to 1) better understand participants' perceptions of and experiences in the policy co-design process and 2) identify strengths and areas for improvement for future policy co-design processes.

Methods: We conducted 32 individual semi-structured interviews with co-design participants across the three regions (Yakima County (n=12), Clallam County (n=7), and Thurston County (n=8) and with members of the University of Washington's (UW) internal research team between March and April 2023. Our sample was composed of law enforcement officers (n=12), service providers (n=12), people with lived experience of substance use (n=10)*, and UW internal team members (n=5). All interviews, which ranged from 20–70 minutes, were conducted remotely using the online teleconferencing platform Zoom. The interviews were conducted by the Research with Expert Advisors on Drug Use (READU) team, which is comprised of people with lived and living experience of drug use and individuals with traditional training in research. Each interview was then audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Analysis: We conducted a rapid analysis process (RAP) by creating a RAP template with domains and categories that were identified from the interview guide. We summarized, focused, and organized the data by completing the RAP template for each transcript. Lastly, we created a matrix of the RAP templates, reviewed the data, and generated themes.

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*The breakdown of sample sizes for participant roles may not sum up to the total sample size as some participants held multiple roles and had different identities.

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1. Early Process

1.1. Involvement and Participation in the Process

In our interviews with co-design participants, we observed several ways participants became involved in the project. Participants were either invited by a member of the internal University of Washington team, invited by a community contact, invited by a colleague or delegated to represent their organization. Many participants expressed excitement at having been asked to join and described a “desire to improve the community.” Some participants were asked to join due to their expertise in substance use treatment or drug recognition, while others were simply assigned by a supervisor at their agency. Overall, participants were happy to share their input and looked forward to hearing from multiple other perspectives from those in other roles.

The internal University of Washington team was led by a clinical psychologist and researcher, who helped invite other collaborators, including a facilitation consultant, a law enforcement consultant, a community activist consultant, a research coordinator, and a research team of community members. Each member of the team was specifically invited for this project with the intention of including different voices and experiences on the internal team.

“I think policies in general especially when they're kind of made generally come from higher up and there's a lot of times... Like it's just like a hard pill to swallow especially when we're talking about the Blake decision. It was just like oh, hey, this is what you're doing now. This is how it's going, okay, like, okay, cool. I guess that's what we're doing. So it was kind of nice I guess to be invited so to speak to kind of at least give an opinion, not that they're gonna listen to it, but at least an opinion anyways.” [ID14]

“So when I was asked this by a community partner, I was thrilled to be able to be part of it. And yeah. It's my village. I love my village, and I want it to be healthier.” [ID25]

1.2. Hopes and Expectations for the Process

Interviewees had a varied range of hopes and expectations for the co-design process. While some participants entered the process with little background information, hopes, and expectations for the process, others had more specific hopes in mind.

For those that did not have many expectations, we received feedback that they did not know what the process would entail and what it would accomplish. A few participants were reluctant as to how the co-design process would work and were hesitant to represent their agency, but the majority entered the process with an open mind and willingness to discuss issues with others.

More specific participant hopes included increasing connections, learning more, and creating valuable solutions for their community. First, participants expressed hope that these co-design meetings would improve relationships among law enforcement, healthcare service providers, and people with lived experience of drug use in their community. One participant also expressed hope that these meetings would help address stigma around drug use and overdose in the community. Another wanted to advocate for the perspectives of people who use drugs. Next, participants expressed that they wanted to learn more about

the “Blake decision” and share their experiences and resources in the county with other participants. Lastly, participants also wanted solutions to come from both sides – that is, develop a collaborative solution with multiple stakeholders’ input. Participants shared that if the end product had a significant impact, that would make the time and effort put in worthwhile.

Some participants expressed that their expectations were met because the process of having law enforcement officers, service providers, and people with lived experience of drug use all come together at the same table fostered greater understanding of each others’ points of view and formed trusting relationships. Others felt that at the time of the interview, their expectations had not yet been met or were unsure about whether the group’s goals had yet been achieved. However, it is important to note that these interviews occurred from the end of March through the end of April, and the co-design process continued into mid-June, so participant views may have changed as the project progressed.

The internal team generally hoped to strengthen relationships in each community. Although they were excited to see the solutions that came out of each community, they did not have specific expectations for outcomes; rather, they wanted solutions to be collaborative and site-driven. As facilitators, they hoped to create conditions for participants to collaborate and find ways to improve the system.

“A solution. A solution to a lifelong problem that has plagued our city and state for a very long time, a solution with definitely no end in sight. Everything that we have thrown at the issue has not worked yet. [...] So we hope that we can turn this around and we can find a better solution and find a better outcome.” [ID11]

“Education more than anything. And not just one-sided, it's education for all, for legislators, for affected people, for law enforcement. And I truly believe that education of these matters, throughout, as a large group of people will help find common ground and then we can build from there. So being able to find that common ground build more than anything.” [ID16]

“Before we started this, I had started making relationships with some of the mental health partners in town. And a lot of that was self-initiated, so once we started bringing more and more people on board, yeah, my hopes were, we could continue those relationships with a lot of these different groups. And I still... I use them to this day.” [ID31]

2. Overall Process and Experience

2.1. Unexpected Experiences and Outcomes

Overall, participants were surprised by the high level of engagement of diverse stakeholders in their regional co-design group. Many participants were pleasantly surprised by how many different roles and perspectives were represented in their group. A few stated that they were surprised that participating in this collaborative co-design process was even an option, because usually decisions were handed down to them.

Several other participants shared that the level of law enforcement officer involvement in the process was unexpected. Several participants were surprised at how warm and open they perceived law enforcement to

be. In particular, they expressed appreciation that law enforcement was willing to engage in co-design conversations and stated that they gained deeper insight on law enforcement's challenges and perspectives. Participants also said they were surprised at how vulnerable others were in sharing their stories about their origins of service and that the group's vulnerability helped build stronger connections. A few people were surprised to learn about resources from each other: they were surprised about both the resources already available and the lack of knowledge about these resources.

The internal team was surprised that Yakima County's co-design group kept growing as they continued to invite more stakeholders to the conversation and that most of the law enforcement officers had to drop out of Thurston County's co-design group. Multiple team members also expressed surprise at the variety of solutions and approaches each site took.

"But I would say, again, I could confidently walk away from this project understanding that law enforcement really does care, that we all want the same things, that we want people who are using drugs in this climate, for me, to stay alive and I think for law enforcement, ultimately that is their goal as well." [ID18]

2.2. Positive Experiences

Co-design participants shared several themes around positive experiences. One commonly stated positive aspect was well-structured facilitation, organization, and direction from the University of Washington team to guide them through the process. It was easier to collaborate with a clear direction and activities to do at each session, and there was good communication from the University of Washington team.

Other positive feedback was that there was a good mix of participants in different community roles, which allowed them to learn from other perspectives. Most participants also appreciated the openness and welcoming environment and felt that everyone shared a common goal and worked well together. This diverse and collaborative environment allowed participants to learn about each other, gain knowledge about resources, and build meaningful connections.

The internal team appreciated how much they learned from co-design participants throughout this project. They also agreed that their own team worked well together to facilitate and organize the process. Another positive is that they thought participants built strong relationships with each other that stemmed from similar stories and values they shared.

"Everybody has great experience but picking kind of equitably throughout our whole community. We have so many resources, and they really picked great people that gave completely different perspectives. People work under different missions, and we were able to peel back the layers to find where our missions, even though different, might align. We might have some shared interest there, so that was really good." [ID24]

2.3. Negative Experiences

Participants noted that the time commitment to attend co-design meetings was sometimes hard to manage. Co-design meetings ranged from 2 to 4 hours, depending on the agenda for the specific meeting, which sometimes made participation difficult to manage alongside full-time jobs.

Additionally, we received feedback that it took a while for the group to make progress because they weren't sure what was expected at first. After they got started, it was often difficult to stay on the same page because people were too frequently joining or dropping out of the group. In Yakima County, people kept joining the group and participants said that it slowed the group down to catch new members up on their progress, whereas in Thurston County, participants had to drop out, largely due to short staffing issues, which placed a greater workload on the remaining participants.

Co-design sessions were held in a mixed format of in-person, hybrid, and all virtual meetings. Almost all participants thought it was much more difficult to build connections on Zoom and would have much preferred in-person meetings to remote Zoom meetings or hybrid formats.

Lastly, participants expressed that the representation of roles in their groups could have been more balanced. For example, participants with lived experience of drug use were less represented in Yakima County, whereas law enforcement participants were less represented in Thurston County.

The internal team echoed participants' thoughts that participants dropping out of the process was also a challenge. Some internal team members shared that it was sometimes stressful to ensure that voices were heard equally amongst group members and the internal team, especially considering the dynamics of historical power present in the room.

"I think that consistency in participant attendance is a struggle. And also the want for most of us, many of us I think, was the sentiment of having these meetings be in person." [ID5]

2.4.Suggestions for Improving the Process

For future co-design processes, current participants recommended providing clearer background information on what the project was about and what participation in the project would entail when inviting participants to join. Similarly, it was suggested that facilitators to get a stronger commitment from those agencies or individuals who agreed to participate so that they did not drop out partway into the process and leave other participants with a heavier workload. Current participants also suggested that future participants should identify the goal to work towards earlier in the process.

Participants gave feedback on what types of participants should be included in the future co-design process. Some suggested inviting first responders and fire department personnel as future co-design participants, because they were also deeply involved in the issues discussed and because there was less stigma from people with lived experience towards them. Some also said that overdose was a medical issue and therefore needed to involve first responders as part of the conversation. Participants also wanted future sessions to have a more balanced representation of different roles, with more equal numbers of law enforcement officers, people with lived experience, and service providers. In addition to the current roles invited, participants suggested inviting more people with a "middle ground" role, that is, other people in the community affected by the issue, such as business owners, homeowners, and others, as they may have valuable input and should also be included in developing the solution(s).

Participants appreciated the law enforcement consultant's wisdom and input throughout the process. Some expressed that there should also be a consultant with lived experience of drug use in a similar role.

Lastly, there was overwhelming consensus that future co-design sessions should be conducted all in-person, rather than some sessions held in a hybrid or solely virtual format. Participants reported feeling much more connected to others when meetings were in-person and thought it was harder to form meaningful relationships over Zoom.

The internal team agreed that it was important to ensure that representation of members from different roles are more balanced in the future, and suggested having back-up representatives that could fill in if original participants had to drop out of the process. Other internal team ideas included hosting a facilitation training for community members to continue work in their own communities and having more one-on-one conversations between law enforcement and people with lived experience of drug use to increase their comfort levels with each other.

"Thinking about who is not getting to the table. Because these meetings have such a huge impact on the landscape of counties and our state. And if the room is filled with people who have the easiest access of contact, that's just gonna change the whole landscape. [...] How do we diversify the group and how does UW or the ADAI strategically think about reaching out to those communities or making them larger, potentially."
[ID21]

3. Facilitation

3.1.Strengths of Facilitation and Engagement

Participants commented that facilitation strengths included having a strong framework for the process, effective communication, and creating a comfortable and respectful environment for conversations. Specifically, many participants liked the Theory U framework that the facilitation consultant presented. Theory U is a framework for systems collaboration by first building relationships, then taking time to explore what is needed in the community, and then prototyping solutions that meet these needs. Participants reported that it was helpful to take time in the beginning to find common purpose and connect with each other, rather than immediately jumping into solutions.

Most participants also thought the facilitation was structured and organized. They liked that agendas were sent out before the start of each meeting and follow-up notes were sent summarizing each codesign meeting and next steps. Facilitators also allowed people to feel comfortable sharing by encouraging respect in the room, through activities such as co-creating group norms at the first meeting. The facilitators worked well together and did a good job letting everyone in the group express their opinion without letting the environment become combative.

The internal team thought that the facilitation consisted of a good balance between structured conversation and open-ended participant input with redirecting back to the agenda when needed. They also agreed that the facilitation team collaborated well together and that facilitation roles were well split up between

facilitators. The internal team also thought they did a good job keeping law enforcement in two of the regions engaged throughout the process, which can sometimes be challenging.

“I think what worked really well was they would task us with actual questions and prompts to think about, but then also encourage us to think outside of the box a little bit more of how we were answering and looking at things, which was a really amazing experience.” [ID08]

3.2. Areas for Improvement for Facilitation and Engagement

Most participants said that the facilitation was a great experience, a few also suggested some areas for improvement. Participants reported that the hybrid Zoom format was not ideal, especially when the facilitator(s) were on Zoom and participants were in person. This was due to both logistical issues such as being unable to hear either side or see specific faces, and because having some people online made it more difficult to build relationships among participants and between participants and facilitators.

Also, participants thought that differences in opinions could have been better mediated by facilitators redirecting the group, splitting up strongly opinionated people in breakout rooms, or allowing time to decompress between polarized conversations. Some participants also expressed that off-topic and tangential conversations that emerged from the group could have been redirected more firmly back to the co-design agenda. Additionally, for regions that had participants constantly joining throughout the process, it became repetitive to explain all the work that was already done and some existing participants felt that it slowed progress.

Additionally, participants suggested having lighter moments incorporated into the facilitation process, as meeting topics were often tense and serious. This would allow everyone to take better care of themselves. Having a designated physical space where people can decompress and relax between heavy conversations was also suggested.

Another facilitation challenge was remaining intentionally neutral and not swaying participants' ideas, but at the same time intervening if conflict emerged. Additionally, it was a challenge to ensure the continued participation of some people in recovery, or people with lived experience. Lastly, internal members wished that participants could also develop more facilitation skills to keep their own work going in the future after the official co-design process ended.

“They were good. I think the only time it was clunky was when we had to do the hybrid, Zoom in person. We heard early on from all three sites that they preferred to do things in person. We couldn't always do that because of obviously the budget and the availability for Dana but I think that the more times that we had to rely on technology, which always was difficult. We couldn't hear, they couldn't hear you. They're on a screen, they can't see you very well, they can't hear you.” [ID19 – Internal Team]

3.3. Suggestions for Future Facilitators

Many participants agreed that having a neutral third party as a future facilitator for codesign sessions would be most ideal, since that group would be less biased than someone with community ties. For example, some service providers in the community could bring their own skewed interests.

Participants agreed that the future facilitation should continue to include a law enforcement officer, facilitation expert, and educator or psychologist in order to have a well-rounded facilitation team and lend credibility to the team. Although some expressed that it did not matter which organization facilitated, they did emphasize that it would be important to hire a professional communicator whose job was to facilitate, and it would also be great if a subject matter expert and/or person with lived experience in substance use could also be included on the facilitation team. Another idea presented was to have someone who participated in this current first-round of co-design process to co-facilitate the next round, such as a passionate community advocate.

Facilitator traits that were cited as beneficial included being non-judgmental, strong-willed, open-minded, and able to move conversations forward. Overall, participants wanted future facilitators that could understand, listen, communicate empathetically, and resolve participant conflicts. This would be someone who could read the personalities and power dynamics in the room, understand different personalities, and be aware of any conflicts that may arise and how to mitigate them.

Similarly, the internal team believed that neutral facilitators were ideal, and that it would be best for a public organization to facilitate future co-design processes because of the nature of the project. It would make most sense for state, county, or city organization members to facilitate, and non-profit organizations or academic institutions were cited as potential future facilitators. Facilitators that have awareness of laws and context of Washington state and specific counties' environments would be helpful. Ideally, future facilitator(s) would be able to create a bridge between people with lived experience of drug use and law enforcement. It also would be good to train community members to facilitate, design, and host their own conversations.

"But a good facilitator is somebody who's there with a strong presence, but can listen as well, and who can think and see a direction of where folks are going and help to lead them either in that direction, continue that discussion, or divert them if we're getting off track." [ID30]

4. Group Dynamics

4.1. Comfort Level

The majority of the participants felt comfortable sharing their opinions and experiences in the co-design process. They felt that they were welcomed, valued, and respected and that no judgment was passed. Most of the participants felt that the group was receptive to the different perspectives and backgrounds of each participant and that the group was able to accept their differences and work towards the same goal. Factors that were perceived to have contributed to participants' comfort levels were personal characteristics, the sharing of uncontroversial opinions, relationship-building, and strong facilitation. Most participants felt that trust was a crucial foundation for increasing participants' comfort levels. Trust was established over time through relationship-building, gaining familiarity with one another, and vulnerability or connection through sharing personal experiences, inside and outside of the co-design sessions. Participants who were in regions with close-knit communities and who already had existing relationships and connections with other participants felt more comfortable sharing their opinions during the process. Importantly, most interviewees also felt that the facilitators created a safe space that allowed them to share their opinions.

Conversely, some participants expressed hesitancy in sharing their opinions, especially if they felt that their views were controversial or that they differed from the dominant perspective. A few interviewees felt that the discussions were dominated by the same participants who were more vocal. This group dynamic made them feel unsupported as there was little space in the discussion for them to speak up and share their opinions. They felt that the facilitators or other co-design participants in the group could have encouraged participants who were less vocal to share their opinions more often. Additionally, some participants shared that historical or contextual factors that preceded the co-design process, such as personal histories with other participants and recent events in the community, contributed to some discomfort with sharing their opinions in the process.

The internal team also felt that most participants were comfortable in the process, especially in communities that were small and close. They noted that some people with lived experience of drugs use may not have felt comfortable sharing their opinions in large groups and in the presence of law enforcement officers. The internal team also cited other factors such as the language used and hostile systems, which further contributed to participants' potential discomfort. They also noted that some law enforcement officers were reserved and hesitant to share their opinions at the start of the process as they anticipated judgment from other participants, considering the negative community perceptions of law enforcement officers. However, some internal team members felt that because their team included people with similar professional backgrounds as the participants (e.g., law enforcement), it increased the participants' comfort level and encouraged participants to share their opinions.

"We were able to kind of set some of our own bylaws [...] like what's important to us and being respectful and open-minded...like what are our needs when we're communicating with other people. And so like everybody followed those, everybody was really respectful, and open-minded. Yeah, I felt really good about it." [ID24]

"I wasn't always comfortable. But that's okay because it's never super comfortable when you have 10 people in the room and there's differing outlooks on the world and outlooks on the problem or the issue or whatever you wanna call it, so there's bound to be some un-comfortability." [ID17]

4.2. Balance of Power

Most participants felt that there was a good balance of power and that all participants had an equal and fair opportunity to voice their opinions. Some felt that no participants monopolized or dominated the conversation and that all participants listened to each other and were respectful. Some felt that there were no overt power dynamics between the participants and that all participants were seen as equals, regardless of their professional roles or backgrounds. They felt that the established group norms and the group dynamics allowed participants to remain open-minded and allowed the conversation to flow smoothly. Many participants felt that there was a good representation of the community in the group and a good balance of people from different roles and backgrounds. The inclusion of participants from all walks of life was perceived to have contributed positively and significantly, due to the diversity of views and perspectives, to the balance of power in the group.

However, a smaller subset of participants shared that the balance of power varied and depended on the individuals who attended the sessions. These few participants noted that the conversation was sometimes dominated by the same voices and that some participants were excluded because they were less comfortable

with voicing their opinions in the group. They felt that ultimately, the participants who were the most vocal in the process dictated the solution, and their perspectives were most represented in the solution.

A few people felt that the co-design participants were not representative of the community more broadly, and that some important stakeholders who work with both law enforcement and people with lived experience of substance use, were not involved and should have been invited to join the process. They expressed a desire to actively involve and include the diverse perspectives of more people with lived experiences of substance use, law enforcement officers, and service providers in the co-design process.

A few interviewees felt intimidated and uncomfortable in the presence of law enforcement, especially when they were present in uniform, reinforcing a power dynamic in the group. Several interviewees, including those who personally did not feel uncomfortable, shared the concern that some people with lived experience of substance use were less engaged due to discomfort and lack of safety with sharing their perspectives and personal experiences.

In alignment with the perceptions of the co-design participants, the internal team felt that the balance of power varied across the different sites and changed throughout the process. Specifically, they felt that there was a balance of power in two regions, with the third region having limited input from people with lived experience of drug use. They also felt that participants who were more vocal discouraged others from sharing their true opinions or opposing views, as they might not want to start a conflict. The internal team believed that other factors such as staffing limitations, county characteristics, and community perceptions could have influenced the balance of power in the groups.

“I think it was pretty good overall. I mean, there just is some power imbalance between law enforcement and anyone else. There just is. I have never walked into a meeting with a vest and a gun. So like whether it's intended to or not, that creates a power imbalance. [...] But I think that everyone did a pretty good job of trying to keep it as equitable as possible and allowing everybody space” [ID32]

“It felt like a round table. It didn't feel like, I mean, there was definitely a facilitator and people who were kind of in charge. But I think there was a lot of freedom in the room to speak up. And I think there was certain people that felt more comfortable contributing more often, but I don't think they had, I would never use the word power to describe what they were using or trying to take advantage of or anything, so.” [ID28]

4.3. Conflict and Conflict Resolution

A majority of the interviewees shared that they were not aware of or did not witness any conflicts that occurred during the co-design process. They believed that the differences in ideas, opinions, and views were welcomed by the facilitators and that the participants listened and learned from each other professionally. Other participants felt that although there were no major conflicts, there were points of contention or tense discussions where there were constructive debates of different views. These participants felt that these debates were a healthy and essential part of the discourse. Interviewees believed that the group independently addressed and navigated any disagreements in a respectful manner, ensuring that all opinions were valued, and all misunderstandings were clarified. Some participants also felt that any disagreements were well facilitated and reconciled, and opinions were well validated by the facilitators.

A few participants described a conflict in the co-design sessions related to the use of stigmatizing language and perspectives on topics such as recovery (abstinence approach vs. harm reduction approach) and the criminalization of drug possession following the Blake decision. These participants described the discussion's heated nature and the discomfort they felt while witnessing the conflict. These participants also felt that the conflict was not healthy or productive and had negatively influenced the group dynamics for the remainder of the session. A few interviewees also noted that events and conversations that happened in the community outside of the co-design process may have spilled over or influenced the group dynamics.

The UW internal team perceived minimal conflict among the co-design participants. Some described hearing of or witnessing conflict inside and outside of the co-design sessions and the formation of cliques among participants that influenced the group dynamics. The UW internal team was mindful of potential conflict when assigning participants to small groups and avoided assigning participants with history of conflict together in the same group. Generally, they felt that in small group discussions participants could resolve their differences independently. However, they noted that there was an instance where facilitators had to follow up separately with participants who were involved in a conflict.

"No, not really. I don't think that there was any. I think there was a few moments where people had differing ideas or different experiences, but it didn't turn into actual conflict, it was people discussed things appropriately and it was addressed appropriately. Nobody was... There was never anybody shouting over each other, or nobody getting themselves really upset or not being... Nobody that seemed to be needing to take a moment to continue. And so it remained very respectful throughout." [ID13]

5. Acceptability and Feasibility of the Solution(s)

5.1. Acceptability of the Solution(s)

Yakima: Community Coalition Meetings

Yakima participants chose to extend the co-design conversations into monthly coalition meetings and to include more stakeholders in meetings (judges, prosecutors, county commissioners, etc.) to learn more about:

- how to educate people within the system providing services;
- how to have more regular service provider meetings with law enforcement across the county for more communication and;
- how to improve a booking triage system in jails to assess people's needs.

Many co-design participants from Yakima liked the solution that was developed through the process. Participants felt that the solution would help people with lived experience of substance use who were incarcerated by increasing their access to resources. They also spoke at length about the benefits of involving more stakeholders in the meetings to bring in different perspectives and address stigma towards people with lived experience of substance use. Participants enjoyed establishing connections and building rapport with other members of the community and learning more about their work. They felt that meetings improved communication about the existing resources and reduced siloing and redundancy. Participants described using this knowledge about the existing resources in their own day-to-day work. Lastly, some participants

felt that the community in Yakima, especially people with lived experience of substance use, would be receptive to the solution and support it.

Although most participants shared the perspective described above, a few participants instead believed that their solution would not create lasting change in the system and that it may only help a subset of people with lived experience of substance use and not the majority. Some participants felt that the continuation of the co-design process was not a solution and felt discouraged that there were no tangible results or action plans being developed from the meetings. A few participants expressed confusion regarding the solution and felt that there was no closure for the co-design process and a lack of future direction for the solution. Others expressed concerns about the sustainability of the process and the continuation of these meetings after the completion of the project and collaboration with UW. Of note, these interviews were conducted in April. Many plans to continue these coalition meetings were finalized at the conclusion meeting in June. Finally, a few interviewees felt that there could be mixed or negative reactions from the community regarding the solution as it may not be perceived as an emergency response.

Despite the positive overall perceptions of the solutions, many participants in Yakima felt that the invitation and inclusion of more stakeholders in the process was a distraction and led to many tangents in the conversation and slowed progress. They felt that these stakeholders should have joined the process in the beginning.

"I like that it's actually bringing everybody together in the fact that maybe we can stop duplicating some processes and some programs. And then, it's hopefully gonna improve the communication so that we can provide just... From my perspective, provide the officers in the field who then in turn can give it to the people who are in need of the services in potentially a more expeditions manner or at least the good... The right information." [ID22]

Thurston: Letter Writing Project in Jails

The Thurston group chose to pilot a project to increase referral to peer services for people entering the Olympia City Jail. A codesign team member, a peer, wrote a personal letter that would be handed to people at booking. These letters asked people to compose a personal statement with their stories that could be submitted via a kite system to peers at a local behavioral health organization, Familiar Faces. This kite then would initiate a peer to contact the person while they still were incarcerated or after their release. In May 2023, the Olympia City Jail was closed, thus the project shifted to the Nisqually Jail.

Participants from Thurston generally felt that the solution focused on an important population and part of the system. They felt that the solution had the potential to connect people with lived experiences with substance use with services or resources, who would otherwise not have access to these services or resources. A few participants felt that the solution was personal, and it provided hope and goals for people who were incarcerated. They also felt that the Thurston community would be receptive to the solution as it was not controversial and was meaningfully helping people who were incarcerated.

Conversely, some participants believed that the solution did not prioritize the needs of people with lived experience of substance use who are incarcerated or address the root causes of the opioid epidemic. Rather,

this subset of participants felt that the solution may potentially divert resources away from other services or agencies that are working with people with lived experience of substance use. A few participants felt discouraged by the closure of the Olympia City jail as they had invested time and effort to obtain buy-in for the solution from individuals who worked at the jail, only to have to repeat the process again. They expressed uncertainty regarding the direction of the solution due to these unexpected circumstances. Some participants also felt that the solution was dictated by participants who were the most vocal in the group and that it did not represent their thoughts or views.

“I think that there will be a handful of support. Absolutely. From community providers, from law enforcement, from lawmakers, other community agencies. I also think that there will be a handful of people that will shrug it off and think that, What's the point?” [ID26]

Clallam: Officer Wellness Sessions; Sharing Education and Success Stories

Clallam participants chose to pilot 2 ideas:

1. Officer Wellness Program: A project aimed to increase law enforcement officer mental health and trauma-informed response by having a mental health therapist host a series of learning sessions teaching officers about mental health.
2. Education + Success Stories: Participants hired a videographer to co-develop a video showcasing law enforcement and people with lived experience of drug uses’ success stories and to educate the public more about what law enforcement is doing in the community.

All participants in Clallam felt that the solutions that were developed through the co-design process focused on helping two important populations, law enforcement officers and people who used drugs. Participants felt that the officer wellness program was important as they believed that law enforcement officers were not able to help others if they were not receiving support for their own problems. They believed the solution addressed gaps in the current agency response to debriefing traumatic events for law enforcement officers, high turnover rates, and chronic stress. They also believed that the solution would address misconceptions about law enforcement officers and ultimately improve interactions between law enforcement officers and people who use drugs.

A few participants discussed how the education and success stories video could address stigma towards law enforcement officers and people with lived experience of substance use. They also felt that it would celebrate people with lived experience of substance use, promote a sense of community, and provide hope and connections for people with lived experience of substance use. The solution was also perceived to be a starting point for a broader conversation that should be expanded to the community. The participants from Clallam believed that the Clallam community would support the solution, which values law enforcement officers, as a similar project was previously well-received. Lastly, the interviewees from Clallam did not discuss any limitations or negative views about the solution itself but did share recommendations for expanding the scope of impact if more money was available (see section 5.3).

“It seems simplistic, but for us, to treat people well in different situations requires us to be well, in good shape ourselves. [...] officers in Washington, especially in urban areas, are gonna have high turnover, high stress, a lot of things to think about, a lot of real challenges emotionally and otherwise, psychologically. So, every place

you can get that... You wouldn't want somebody helping you who's got their own problems that are not well-managed.” [ID10]

5.2. Feasibility of the Solution(s)

Yakima: Community Coalition Meetings

Perceptions of the feasibility of the solution varied among participants from Yakima. Some participants expressed optimism about the implementation of the solution due to the continued participation of participants, the involvement of new stakeholders in the Yakima community, and their desire to make an impact. They felt that the ongoing meetings would lead to an expansion of knowledge and resources that would help support the implementation of the other solutions. Other participants felt that the solution would be feasible under certain conditions which may include the presence of a strong facilitator, slow adjustments, concrete action plans, and adequate funding and resources for the implementation.

Some, however, felt that the solution was not feasible as the group was continuing to expand as more stakeholders were invited to the process. They felt that it was necessary to arrive at a more concrete solution or outcome and that the changes, because of the solution, were slow. Many expressed concerns about the sustainability of the process after the end of the project as they felt that there was no implementation plan and neutral facilitator or leader that had been identified to lead the coalition. A few participants discussed how the limited resources, such as funding and time, did not allow them to develop a solution that would better serve the needs of people who use drugs, such as a crisis or resource hub.

“I think if we continue and have a good facilitator, I'm hoping who I have in mind takes the role, and I don't know what the involvement of UW will be in future, but I think if it continues the way it does, I think it will be successful. If it dissolves, because of the lack of leadership, and I think that's where it will fail.” [ID31]

Thurston: Letter Writing Project in Jails

Some Thurston participants felt that the solution was simple, and it could be easily implemented and carried forward. These participants felt that the solution was not costly and that there were few logistical barriers to implementation as the personal letters would not require many resources to send. A few participants shared that they were able to leverage existing resources in the community that already served people who are incarcerated. They felt that the work had already been completed and that further implementation would only consist of coordinating the program. Lastly, some interviewees believed that the solution would be successful because of the passion and active involvement of people with lived experience of substance use.

Other Thurston participants expressed concerns regarding the feasibility of the solution and uncertainty about its implementation, given the closure of the Olympia City Jail and the pivot to the Nisqually Jail. They felt that the Nisqually Jail, which is operated by the Nisqually Indian Tribe, was not as easily accessible and that there were no mechanisms established to continue the program in the new jail. Participants also cited resource and time constraints as they felt that the solution required a large time and work commitment, especially since service providers were experiencing high caseloads and capacity limits. Of note, the solution was successfully implemented at the Nisqually Jail beginning in June 2023.

“It was good, but I end up feeling like currently I feel like this could be a permanent full-time gig, but I'm balancing that with a case load of 20-25 people already so it kind of gave me a little bit of anxiety waiting in the jail, moving kind of, I think prevented a big flood of self-referrals.” [ID17]

Clallam: Officer Wellness Sessions; Sharing Education and Success Stories

The participants in Clallam generally felt that the solutions were feasible given the current resources in the county and the time constraints of the process. Some felt that the solutions were not overly ambitious because they were tackling a small, manageable part of a larger problem. The participants in Clallam felt that they had a good group of participants who were passionate about influencing change and that they are crucial to driving, progressing, and maintaining the implementation of the solutions. Many expressed optimism regarding the implementation of the solutions and felt that they would at least be partially implemented. A few interviewees also felt that the solutions were feasible as they had received top-down support from law enforcement agencies. and that they had the potential to change perspectives and impact the local community. Others felt that the law enforcement wellness program specifically had the potential to be scaled up or expanded to other units.

A few participants discussed concerns regarding the feasibility of the officer wellness solution and its sustainability moving forward. They discussed the need for greater law enforcement involvement and participation in the officer wellness program, greater commitment from other participants in the group to complete the implementation of the solution, and a greater willingness from agencies to allocate more resources to the solution. Funding and policy constraints were also perceived as barriers that limited the development of solutions.

“I think we got a group of people that are pretty passionate about making change. Do I think it'll be... Go through? Yes, I do. You always hear funding and this and all that coming from different... But the reality of it is, is there's enough of us that work together here in this county to where it gets done. I mean, the improvements that have taken place in the last two years have been huge. And so, yeah, I definitely believe in my community, definitely.” [ID4]

“We'll see, but it's not overly ambitious. It isn't trying to solve all the problems of the world, just taking on a little piece of it in conjunction with a bunch of other things that we're working on. So, yeah, I'm optimistic.” [ID 10]

5.3.Suggestions for Improving the Solution(s) or its Implementation

Yakima: Community Coalition Meetings

Some participants from Yakima felt that the solution should have a larger scope of impact. They felt that the solution should help all people with lived experience of substance use, in addition to those who are incarcerated, and wanted to see greater accountability in the system. Some participants felt that a solution could have greater impact if it focused on prevention as opposed to treatment.

Other interviewees discussed specific examples of ways they would like to see the scope expanded such as increased law enforcement training on substance use disorders and mental health conditions and

improvements to the booking triage system. Several participants discussed the need for peer navigators in the booking triage system to help with referrals for people with lived experience of substance use and better interactions with booking officers.

Participants felt that more people with lived experience of substance use should be included in future coalition meetings in Yakima to ensure that solutions are appropriate and effective. In addition, representatives from the city of Yakima should be involved in the meetings to provide information on funding. Other participants expressed a desire to receive updates on the progress of the solution without being directly involved.

"I think we had a pretty good diverse group of people in there. I would have liked to see... I know the people from the city of Yakima were a little busy. And so what I like to see towards the end have more representation, continued representation from them because they're our largest city in our county. And a lot of the assets sometimes get funded just for the city or they get funded through the city, and so it'd be nice to, again, share that information with everybody to show the opportunities that are out there." [ID23]

Thurston: Letter Writing Project in Jails

Participants from Thurston offered a range of suggestions for improvement, with some participants expressing a desire to develop an additional solution that focused on upstream solutions that prevented people with lived experiences of substance use from getting booked in the first place. Others expressed a desire to increase human connections for people with lived experience of substance use and offer other ways of communication that may be more accessible than solely written communication. For the implementation of the solution, participants discussed increasing accountability for the letters by establishing timelines and expectations. They felt that the group should be mindful of participants' work schedules, workloads, and capacities when implementing the solution. Other participants suggested the establishment of a workflow for potential self-referrals, inviting social workers to the process, and the consideration of county jails, as opposed to city jails, to better reach people who use drugs.

"In the process about the implementation, prior to the implementation designated rules maybe or not rules, but definitely not rules, but expectations for workload." [ID17]

Clallam: Officer Wellness Sessions; Sharing Education and Success Stories

Most Clallam participants did not discuss suggestions to improve the solution developed through the co-design process. A few participants felt that more time was necessary to be able to identify areas for improvement in the implementation of the solution. Another participant believed that influential figures in the county should be identified and invited to participate before the development of the solution, as opposed to after, to obtain buy-in and support. Finally, one participant identified that with more money, a wider-scope solution, for example treatment availability, could be tackled.

"I think, prior to starting the sessions, is finding people that have a lot of influence in their county and in their communities to drum up as much support as they can. We got a lot more after it had already started, and I think if, perhaps meeting with people before it starts [...] so when it actually begins, we have a wider representation of different agencies and things." [ID29]

“I mean I don't know that we can change [the solutions] other than like, if this was given a hundred grand instead of 15, you know what I mean? It's not anything specific that was not done[...] like if we were able to build a place of more beds or whatever that we could take people to. Something like that.” [ID14]

6. Dissemination of Co-Design Process Experiences and Solutions

6.1. Sharing Participants' Experiences in the Process

Participants expressed an interest in sharing their learnings and experiences from the co-design process with other sites, future co-design participants, stakeholders in the local community or county (i.e., colleagues, agencies or organizations, legislators, representatives, community members), and other counties or stakeholders in Washington State. The interviewees offered suggestions for a variety of channels that could be utilized to disseminate the information and reach a broader audience. Some interviewees suggested the dissemination of information through academic channels such as presenting the information as reports or publications and presenting them at academic conferences, meetings, and events. Most of the interviewees suggested the use of traditional and digital media channels and platforms such as websites, social media, emails, newsletters, press releases, and flyers. Lastly, a few interviewees suggested the use of word of mouth through lay or professional networks which could involve agency representatives, legislators, and facilitators from the co-design process.

A few interviewees emphasized the importance of focusing on the stories and experiences of the co-design participants and the impacts that the co-design process has had on them. They felt that the sharing of their stories and personal experiences was more meaningful and compelling to them and the community. Participants also felt that their learnings and experiences could be used to inform the expansion of the process and expressed a willingness to share their experiences with future co-design participants. The internal team members also felt that it was important to prioritize the experiences of the co-design participants over facts and statistics, to better appeal to the community and to honor participants' stories.

“Well, I'd make mention of the positive communication between all these different agencies and groups of people [...] And if others see how positive the interactions [...] People might get on board with it that might be resistant to it.” [ID29]

“Statistics are interesting when there's something that you want or need to know. [...] There's a story behind that. And I think that's the, to me, people understand and change their mind or expand their mind when they hear a story that they can relate to.” [ID19 – Internal Team]

6.2. Sharing the Solutions Developed through the Process

Similarly, participants offered the same suggestions for channels to share the solution that their region developed through the co-design process. They felt that it was necessary to share their solution with the community, participants in their region, and other regions that participated in the co-design process. Participants expressed the desire to share the solution to expand its scope to the community and provide ideas for other interested stakeholders or regions. They felt that it would be helpful to have a summary of their solution and progress with the solution as a reminder and to orient them for future work. Many interviewees also expressed a strong interest in learning about the solutions that other regions developed

through the co-design process. They liked interacting with other regions and learning from one another during one of the co-design sessions as they found it to be encouraging.

“So it was awesome being able to hear how other pilot programs got started, how they're doing, and it was inspirational. Like, we can actually do this. 'Cause there's a lot of talk about doing different things, and then when it comes down to it, it never happens.” [ID26]

7. Internal Team Perceptions and Experiences

7.1. Replicability of the Process

All members of the internal team felt that the co-design process was replicable and should be expanded to other counties in Washington. Participants felt that the co-design process ensures that local policies align with community values. They agreed that the process should not use a one-size fits all approach but rather a bottom-up approach that allows sites to take ownership of developing and implementing their solution. The internal team felt that the co-design process should continue to prioritize the needs and interests of the community and not compare counties to each other. They discussed catalysts to the co-design process being successful including funding, interest from the community, and support for facilitation from the county or non-profit organizations with connections in the community.

“I think it would be replicable if there were willing agencies and willing contacts from each organization to participate, 'cause I feel like maybe not every county. [...] I think if there's good support with facilitation and people in that community want to see that there, then it could happen and there was funding obviously.” [ID2 – Internal Team]

7.2. Timeline of the Process

The internal team felt that the timeline for the process was short, but due to careful planning was sufficient to accomplish the goals of the co-design process. They felt that the short timeline was helpful in ensuring progress for the sites as it allowed participants to participate and contribute to the development of a solution that represented everyone's thoughts. They believed that participant attrition from the co-design process would have been greater if the sessions were held more frequently or over a longer period of time. The internal team also discussed the importance of striking a balance between ensuring that the sessions are not too long and having sessions scheduled closely to ensure that the discussions are fresh and participants remain involved.

“I think trying to meet every other week is really problematic for folks. I think if it went more than a month, we'd probably lose people. So it's really a dance to not overdo it, but not to let things drift off so far that people, when they come back, they don't remember where we were.” [ID19 –Internal Team]

Conclusions

In conclusion, participants generally enjoyed the co-design process and thought that it was valuable. There were several suggestions for improvement for the next round, which included having all future co-design sessions in person for both participants and facilitators, including a person with lived experience as another facilitator, and inviting more participants from other roles in the community. These adjustments would help improve participants' comfort levels and ensure that more effective and representative solutions are developed through the process. Overall, participants appreciated the level of organization, direction, and structure that co-design sessions had, but would have liked to get a clearer sense of what the process entailed before joining. Ultimately, participants across all three regions agreed that it was important to disseminate the findings, their experiences, and the local pilot solutions developed through this initial process to share the work with the broader community.

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