



December 5, 2023

## **The Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts, Reliant Foundation, and RIZE Massachusetts (Worcester, MA)**

The Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts, in partnership with Reliant Foundation and RIZE Massachusetts, announced \$153,824 in combined grant support for a UMass Memorial Health project aimed at advancing prescriber education and opioid use disorder (OUD) treatment in primary care settings throughout Central Massachusetts. Its goal is to increase access to OUD treatment for patients and to train multidisciplinary providers in both OUD treatment and overdose prevention.

Treatment of OUD in a primary care setting addresses it as a chronic health condition that can be treated like high blood pressure or diabetes. Seeking treatment in a primary care office can lower mortality, minimize stigma, and improve overall health. One effective treatment is prescribing buprenorphine. To increase access to this life-saving treatment, the federal government retired previous educational requirements for buprenorphine prescribing. However, the use of buprenorphine has not increased as rapidly as hoped, in part due to a lack of provider familiarity and experience with the use of it.

Statewide, opioid-related deaths reached an all-time high of 2,357 in 2022, an increase of 2.5 percent from 2021, according to the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. By encouraging more prescribers to incorporate OUD treatment into primary care practices, this initiative aims to expand access, normalize treatment, and reduce stigma.

The project being funded at UMass Memorial Health aims to increase buprenorphine prescribing capacity in Massachusetts, especially in primary care settings. The UMass Memorial Health Road to Care team will develop and deliver free training for physicians, physician assistants, and nurse practitioners regardless of their clinical affiliation. The course will also allow prescribers to meet current educational requirements within the new, one-time Medication Access and Training Expansion Act while providing guidance in diagnosing and treating OUD in their patient populations.

The RIZE Massachusetts grant supports a second component of the project that will bring remote expert care to clinicians through the evidence-based Project ECHO (Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes). The model was first used nearly 20 years ago in New Mexico to facilitate hepatitis C treatment close to home, and its effectiveness for OUD treatment was demonstrated recently in a rural New York health system.