

Harm Reduction Is Hope: New Voices of The Front Lines Episode Spotlights MKE Community's Fight Against Overdose Deaths

Samad's House Launches Midwest Regional Black and Brown Harm Reduction Network in Groundbreaking New Podcast Episode



MILWAUKEE, WI, UNITED STATES, July 23, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Samad's House today announced the release of [Episode 2 of its podcast Voices of the Front Lines](#), hosted by founder Tahira Malik. The episode marks a milestone moment with the launch of the Midwest Regional Black and Brown Harm Reduction Network, a coalition built to protect hard-won progress in preventing overdose deaths and to carry harm reduction forward in the communities that need it most.

The episode brings together three leaders doing the work every day - Connie Calderon, Director of Recovery and Peer Support Services at the Milwaukee Turners; Amanda Maria De Leon, Regional Community Impact Manager at Community Medical Services; and Caroline Gaston, a Community Ambassador at Samad's House. Together, they share raw, personal stories from the front lines and make the case for why this new network matters.

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Tahira Malik, Founder of Samad's House

The video podcast is available on [YouTube](#) and [Spotify](#), and the audio episodes are available on all popular podcast

platforms.

Overdose deaths are falling nationally and across Milwaukee. But the decline is not reaching everyone equally, especially Black and Brown communities, where overdose deaths are disproportionately higher, despite similar drug use in white communities. The Midwest Regional Black and Brown Harm Reduction Network will address systemic barriers, including limited access to resources, stigma, and a lack of culturally relevant outreach, ensuring that harm reduction efforts are equitable and effective for all communities.

"Today, we are pleased to acknowledge that the overall number of overdose deaths is dropping

in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and across the nation," Malik says in the episode. "But the decline is not as sharp in Black and Brown communities. Drug overdose deaths continue to ravage our families and our communities."

That gap is the reason the network exists. As Malik explains, the goal is to "elevate the voices of people using harm reduction approaches to save lives, reduce drug stigma, educate the public, and forge policies to keep our users and communities safe. Together, we are launching the Midwest Regional Black and Brown Harm Reduction Network to preserve the progress and move forward with initiatives that create healthy families and communities."

Malik knows this work personally. As a survivor of substance use disorders who became a leader in harm prevention advocacy, out of urgency, she founded Samad's House, a leading sobriety residence for women in recovery. "We were tired of losing our loved ones and our friends to fatal drug overdose," she says. "We feel it's our job just to be able to save some lives."

Much of the conversation cites naloxone, also known by the brand name Narcan, the medicine administered via a nasal spray that can save a life if given shortly after an overdose.

Noting firsthand the impact of naloxone, asserts, "The biggest impact is just having access to naloxone. When I first started in this world 20 years ago, we didn't have

Voices of the Front Lines PODCAST

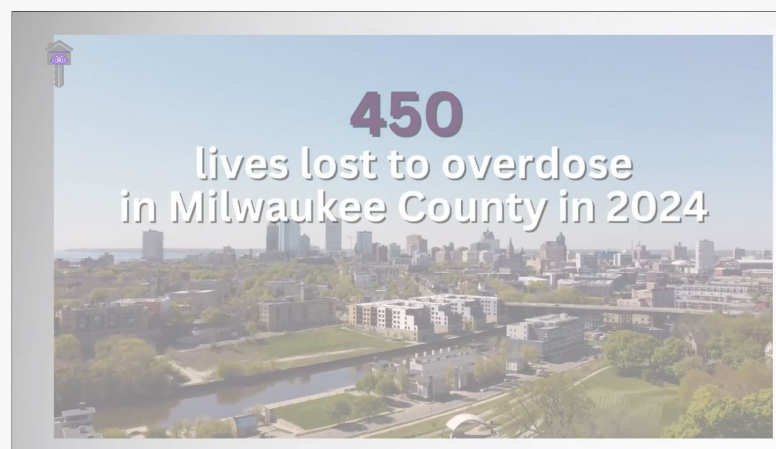
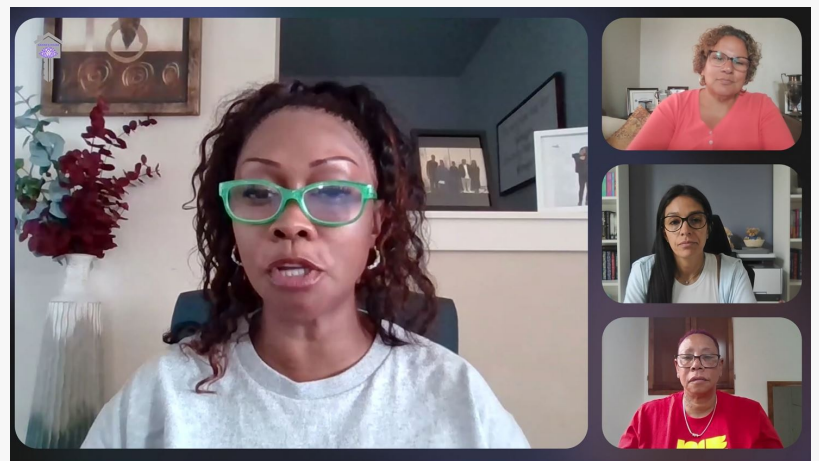


**HOSTED BY
TAHIRA MALIK
SAMAD'S HOUSE FOUNDER**



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access to that. And harm reduction, what is that? Treatment was punitive."

For Gaston, the impact is personal. "I had the experience through lived experience where I accidentally consumed... had an encounter with some fentanyl accidentally. And it was through someone who had access to Narcan. And that's what saved my life," she shares. Now she goes out every Monday to distribute Narcan and train community members. "I found my purpose in saving lives through harm reduction."



The panelists also remember how scarce these supplies once were. Calderon recalls scrambling before her first training at the Milwaukee Turners. "I had to go searching for places just to get three boxes or two boxes to cover the people that came to our training. And so now it's so nice to be able to have plenty of it that we aren't worried about hoarding it because we're so worried we're going to run out."

Malik recalls those early days, too. She reflects on Samad's House's very first Black Balloon Day — a national day of awareness for those lost to drug overdose — and the training De Leon led. "You came in, and you trained a room full of people at Samad's House on the importance of using naloxone. But not only did you train on how to use it, but you also trained on what to look for. A lot of times, people didn't know that someone was overdosing — they thought they were just asleep. They didn't know that their respiratory system was slowing down." That training, Malik says, was a turning point. "You were one of the first people to not only train me, but teach us on the importance of why we needed to put it out in our communities."

The group stresses that harm reduction reaches far beyond naloxone. Calderon points to fentanyl and xylazine test strips as one of the most eye-opening tools she shares.

"Even if you trust the person you're getting them (drugs) from or you think you know them or you're their cousin, this is very important to do," she explains. She also reminds listeners that risk touches everyone. "You don't have to know a drug user to even have it on you. It could be your neighbor's 16-year-old granddaughter getting into her pills, or a baby even accidentally getting into their pills."

Malik reinforces how dangerous the current drug supply has become. "Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that has been tanked in the drug supply and a couple of years ago was responsible for 80% of the fatal drug overdose deaths here in Milwaukee County," she explains. "And xylazine is a horse tranquilizer that they're putting on drugs. It's just as fatal as fentanyl." Testing strips, she

stresses, are now an essential lifeline.

Gaston sums up why harm-reduction supplies matter. "It reduces the risk of catching infections... It reduces the risk of you coming in contact with straight fentanyl or xylazine-laced drugs, which is also a lifesaver."

The panelists repeatedly cited stigma from drug use as a force that keeps people from getting help. De Leon says it plainly, "that's the number one reason why people don't get help — because of that stigma, or people don't understand addiction as a whole."

Further, De Leon shared a comparison that the others readily agreed with regarding the frequent reluctance to help those in need. "We care more about a stray dog, posting it on Facebook... But when we have these unhoused folks living in the street, you don't see anyone advocating and helping." Her solution is for the community to be more humane. "Why not go up to that guy and say, 'Hey, what can I do to help you?' That's how we reduce stigma. That's how we get people into treatment."

Malik agrees, pointing to how stigma plays out even in communities most affected by overdose. "In the most disproportionate neighborhoods, people didn't want that stigma around them," she says. "It goes back to why people choose to just live in their own bubble — because they don't want someone to come in and label them or judge them."

De Leon also offered a direct message to anyone listening who is struggling. "You are worthy. You are worthy of saving. There is hope. I don't care if it's your 21st attempt at treatment. You can still get sober. And we'll meet you where you're at. That's what we're here for."

When Malik asks what resources are still missing, the answer comes fast: housing.

De Leon warns that recent county cuts of \$3.8 million in housing funding could reverse progress. "How in the heck are we going to help these people live a sustainable, sober life when we can't give them one of the main... hierarchy of needs? You need a safe place to lay your head. I hope we don't see a rise in overdoses because now folks don't have that access to housing that they once had."

Malik maintains, "It's pushing people back into the same system that they're once trying to recover from." She also flags looming gaps in healthcare and Medicaid that could widen disparities in the year ahead.

The network's focus on Black and Brown leadership is central to its mission. "People wanna see their people in these roles," De Leon says. "They want to look in the mirror and say, okay, that's my people telling me I'm going to die if I don't start taking the naloxone... It helps us make a better impact on the population that we're serving."

Malik adds that representation offers hope as much as trust. "People can relate and say, 'My people do care about me. They do see me. They do want me to heal,'" she explains. "One thing that was so pivotal for me was to be able to see someone like myself go through what I've been through, or I'm going through, to be able to say, I can do it too. We can recover."

She points to the ambassador program at Samad's House as a living example of this principle. Ambassadors like Gaston go into communities as credible messengers — women with lived experience who can break through walls that no outsider could. "Cece was able to reach people who knew her and perceived her as a credible person," Malik says. "They were more apt to take the resources. And Cece's able to actually get them to take the naloxone. We're not here to judge. We've lost way too many people, and we feel it's our job just to be able to save some lives."

Meanwhile, Calderon points to cultural and language understanding as well, noting that signage and materials often "don't translate exactly in Spanish, or Hmong, or the different languages that Milwaukee is full of."

The panelists also press for a change in how peer support specialists are trained and reimbursed. Some of the most effective peer supporters, Calderon notes, face steep barriers because of state background restrictions that don't reflect their realities. "Some of the best peer support people have been incarcerated for much of their adult life for foolish drug reasons. They don't have that ability that you need because of the requirements of the state." Reforming that training, she argues, would open the door for the very people best suited to the work.

Malik urges the panel to speak to lawmakers, emphasizing three words: "Encourage harm reduction."

And the group agrees that harm reduction is bigger than any single tool. As Malik puts it, "Harm reduction is compassion. Providing compassion is hope, is saving lives." De Leon adds: "Harm reduction is hope."

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(For media interviews with Tahira Malik, contact Michael Frisby at mike@frisbyassociates.com or 202-625-4328.)

About Samad's House

Samad's House is a Milwaukee-based nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting women and families in recovery from substance disorders. Founded by Tahira Malik, the organization operates three sober living homes and a behavioral health clinic offering comprehensive, 120-day intensive programming. Through holistic services, harm reduction tools, and a focus on

mind, body, and spirit, Samad's House empowers individuals to rebuild their lives and achieve lasting wellness. Its Ambassador Program trains recovery program graduates to conduct direct community outreach, distributing naloxone and harm reduction resources across Milwaukee. For more information, visit samadshouse.org.

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