One of the devastating effects of COVID-19 is an increase in mental illness, drug and alcohol use.

Baptist Health emergency departments treat hundreds of patients each year who are suffering from mental illness, substance abuse or both. Duval and Nassau counties in particular have more than their share of overdose deaths.

So we asked ourselves: How can we go upstream, and help these community members receive the support they need before they spiral into crisis? The answer: By working with our community partners, Starting Point and Gateway Community Services.

With financial and staff support from Baptist Health, Starting Point helped us develop the processes and policies to transition overdose patients from the emergency room into outpatient services in Nassau County.

We expanded these efforts in September 2019 with Gateway Community Services Certified Peer Specialists on-site at our emergency department at Baptist North, which serves patients from Duval and Nassau counties.

Once an overdose patient has been stabilized medically at Baptist North, a nurse will ask the patient if they are interested in talking with a Peer. This connection is made possible through Project Save Lives, operated by Gateway Community Services with support from the City of Jacksonville.

Baptist North Assistant Nurse Manager Janie Cowart, RN, has seen the impact Peers can have for patients and team members. “Patients are reluctant to talk with medical professionals about their addiction,” she said. "Peers are able to speak from their own personal experience, and this results in many more patients entering treatment and being connected to recovery resources.”

"Because the Peers have been where they are, our patients will open up with them, and many of them decide to get help.”

The program works. Not only are people getting help, they are overcoming their addictions.

- 52% decrease in overdoses among participants (Nov 2017 – Dec 2019)
- 14% decrease in emergency calls for overdoses (2018 -2019)

Thanks to our partnership with Starting Point and Gateway Community Services, we are prepared to address the increased need as a result of COVID-19.