

Strengthening the Community

Communities with a sense of connectedness—including a common concern about alcohol-related harm—tend to be stronger and healthier. Local governments can strengthen their communities by promoting both responsible attitudes toward alcohol and moderate drinking practices, and by encouraging more effective care for those requiring support for problems related to alcohol.

1. Enhance connectedness

Since supportive interpersonal connections are critical to individual and collective health, efforts should be made to engage people in helping to extend and build community relationships.

Municipal governments can

- ☑ Assess and respond to factors in the community that contribute to harmful drinking patterns
 - environmental factors (e.g., poor economic conditions, easy availability of alcohol)
 - social factors (e.g., shortage of healthy networks, associations, cultural communities)
- ☑ Identify and support protective factors in the community that serve to counter risk of harmful drinking
 - school programs, job placement assistance and professional clubs
 - social service bodies, religious communities, neighbourhood organizations and projects
 - recreational associations and cultural groups
 - facilities and exterior venues, regular and special occasions for civic participation
- ☑ Create and implement a strategy aimed at strengthening a sense of community
 - include a wide representation of stakeholders in the planning and mobilizing process
 - identify shared values and a collective vision
 - adopt initiatives that serve common objectives and distribute responsibility
 - mark achievements and recognize participant contributions

Some questions to consider

- ? How can we best deal with factors in our community linked to dangerous drinking?
- ? What components currently promote safer drinking patterns? How can we promote these?
- ? What resources in our community can be used to enhance connectedness? How can we most effectively build our social capital? What external resources are available?
- ? What can we do to ensure productive community dialogue about alcohol-related concerns?

The presence of real connectedness in constructive and supportive relationships helps people feel they matter, belong, can receive assistance and can contribute. Affirming individual identity and acceptance within healthy social networks without requiring conformity to rigid norms is a strong deterrent to unhealthy use of alcohol and other substances. Efforts to foster community spirit, raise the level of inclusivity, and nurture mutual regard, respect and responsibility for oneself and others will reduce drinking-related harms.

2. Raise consciousness

While education efforts on their own have generally failed to produce change among individuals and across communities, they can (when engaging reflection and action) be useful alongside other initiatives.

Municipal governments can

- ☑ Promote a balanced understanding of the role of alcohol in society
 - acknowledge the positive role of alcohol (e.g., it makes people feel more relaxed and social, is a popular commodity and significant economic driver)
 - draw attention to the fact that alcohol can cause significant personal damage when used as self-medication (to cope with negative emotions or physical pain), or consumed in large amounts (causing falls, accidents and violence) or in excess over a long period of time (causing chronic illness)
 - educate people about how alcohol can damage social relationships if used to alleviate public pressures, conform to exaggerated norms, escape external difficulties, or used as an excuse for vandalism, violence and victimizing others (physical assault, psychological abuse, relational harm, economic deprivation)
 - spread the message that alcohol use can result in substantial added healthcare costs, law and order enforcement expense and employment performance-related losses
- ☑ Increase awareness of the moderate practices and attitudes of the majority
 - launch a social norms marketing campaign exposing the facts that (1) most drinkers do not get drunk or approve of reckless drinking behaviours, and (2) most consumers not only avoid drinking and driving but also support rigorous enforcement measures
- ☑ Promote low-risk drinking guidelines and strategies
 - distribute materials recommending limits for any day and per week, listing situations where no alcohol is the best option, and providing tips on how to avoid intoxication

Some questions to consider

- ? Do we have a clear understanding of the benefits and risks of using alcohol?
- ? Do we recognize that despite its benefits, alcohol is the drug that contributes to far more calculated costs than all illegal psychoactive substances combined? And are we aware that half of all alcohol-related costs stem from occasional excessive drinking by people who are mostly moderate drinkers?
- ? Do we realize that direct revenues from alcohol sales are lower than societal costs related to drinking, and that while moderate alcohol use may have some health benefits for middle-aged people, drinking contributes significantly to the development of serious chronic illness?
- ? Are we aware that alcohol impairment is a major cause of immediate injury?
- ? Are we using a variety of vehicles to convey our messages, and are we tailoring them to reach different target audiences?

Educational efforts should aim to impart a holistic perspective that respects abstinence (and encourages it among youth) and features both low-risk drinking advice for all age brackets and harm reduction strategies. Initiatives aiming to undermine typical overestimations of how many people actually drink excessively or support relaxed stances on alcohol policies should not be relied on alone to bring about cultural shift (Perkins et al., 2010).

3. Improve services

Health promotion that addresses the social ecological context will give greater breadth and depth to prevention initiatives. It will also reduce the burden on healthcare services, which in turn can be provided in a stronger, more economic and more humane manner.

Municipal governments can

- ☑ Implement a workplace alcohol policy for civic officials and staff
 - set rules for alcohol consumption in the workplace or during working hours
 - spell out disciplinary response processes to situations where alcohol use has contributed to employment problems (e.g., absenteeism, reduced performance, inappropriate behaviour, conflicts)
 - provide awareness campaigns, brief intervention and referral to assistance programs to support return to normal responsibility
 - conduct periodic audits to assess work conditions that contribute to alcohol-associated difficulties, and how such prompts may be mitigated
- ☑ Encourage local business and industries to adopt comparable policies
- ☑ Build partnerships with local health and social service providers
 - promote widespread screening and brief interventions for risky drinking in primary healthcare contexts, educational institutions, recreational and cultural settings, and social services
 - work together on adequate supply of more intensive counselling, including cognitive-behavioural skills training for those who need it, via outpatient healthcare services and in-house employee assistance programs
 - join forces to support individuals struggling with chronic alcohol problems and related harms (homelessness, job loss) by providing more integrated services and low-barrier housing arrangements that feature a harm reduction approach

Some questions to consider

- ? Are we promoting a workplace climate where people can both expect and receive support in addressing personal difficulty with alcohol?
- ? Are we helping to equip personnel in various professions/roles to conduct brief interventions?
- ? Are we open to comprehensive assistance in helping individuals with chronic alcohol problems, as opposed to the narrower “quick fix” focus on detoxification, physical recovery and relapse prevention counselling? What are we doing to help with job acquisition and housing retention?

Evidence indicates there is a substantial cost benefit to be gained with early detection and support, which often precludes the need for more intensive, extensive and expensive professionally-attended services.

Municipalities can collaborate with their regional health authorities about adequate availability of treatment programs and facilities, including alternatives to conventional options.

Other ways of responding to those with severe problems merit careful consideration. Housing provisions that include regulated supply of alcohol have seen decreased rates of consumption, reduced experience of crisis and access of emergency services, less encounter with enforcement personnel, improved personal management of hygiene and enhanced health, with welcome economic gain to the public accompanying these developments (Podymow et al., 2006; Larimer et al., 2009).

Steps to Success

How is Our Community Doing?

- We regularly assess and target different social-ecological factors in our municipality that are conducive to inappropriate and unsafe use of alcohol
- We promote those aspects of our community life that discourage unhealthy alcohol use
- We have developed a strategic plan to deal with concerns and exploit assets in a comprehensive fashion involving widespread community ownership and participation
- We assess all communication to ensure a balanced message on alcohol that recognizes benefits, acknowledges harms and positively encourages individual and collective responsibility for reducing damage
- We seek to ensure that local services supply a continuum of stepped care ranging from brief intervention to extended assistance that incorporates stable housing and support for employment

Resource links:

Helping Communities (CARBC). Available at: www.carbc.ca/HelpingCommunities.aspx

Alcohol Publications (CARBC). Available at: www.carbc.ca/Home/Publications.aspx

Ensuring Solutions to Alcohol Problems. Available at: www.ensuringsolutions.org

Don't mix it! A guide for employers on alcohol at work. Available at: www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg240.htm

Alcohol and work: what everyone should know. Available at: www.alcoholandwork.adf.org.au

Reference material:

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Kendall, P.R.W. (2008). *Public health approach to alcohol policy: An updated report from the Provincial Health Officer*. Government of British Columbia, Ministry of Healthy Living and Sport. Available at: www.health.gov.bc.ca/library/publications/year/2008/alcoholpolicyreview.pdf

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Perkins, H.W., Linkenbach, J.W., Lewis, M.A. & Neighbors, C. (2010). Effectiveness of social norms media marketing in reducing drinking and driving: A statewide campaign. *Addictive Behaviors*, 35(10), 866-874.

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This is the fifth in a series of tools designed to help Municipal Governments reduce the harm related to alcohol. The complete resource is available at: <http://carbc.ca/HelpingCommunities/HelpingMunicipalGovernments.aspx>

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