

PREPARED BY THE
INSTITUTE FOR
PUBLIC STRATEGIES
FOR THE MONTANA
COMMUNITY CHANGE
PROJECT

Environmental Prevention: An Approach to Reducing Drinking and Driving and Binge Drinking in Montana

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Prepared by the Institute for Public Strategies for the Montana Community Change Project

Historically, alcohol education and prevention efforts have focused on changing the behavior of individuals. Problem drinking and drug use have been commonly viewed as problems that arise out of the

choices and personal decisions of individuals. This viewpoint reflects the value society places on individual rights and self-determination. However, public health experts and practitioners have learned that the environment—physical, social, legal, economic and political—in which people live, work and play, heavily influences the behavior of individuals. And this environment is defined by the prevailing community attitudes, perceptions, and responses to high-risk drinking and its consequences.

Effective prevention programs require making appropriate modifications to the physical, social, legal, economic and political environments that are an embedded part of the community's culture. This is the work of Environmental Prevention.

Initiating Environmental Prevention in Montana

The Montana Community Change Project (MTCCP) is an Environmental Prevention project funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, a federal agency. The MTCCP began operating

in communities throughout Montana in January, 2008. Its focus: preventing drinking and driving and binge drinking among adults and youth by addressing the environmental factors that contribute to alcohol-related problems.

The project is designed to create community conditions and behavioral expectations that make drinking and driving and binge drinking less probable and less acceptable.

Instead of using traditional strategies, such as education and awareness, the MTCCP employs a proven combination of strategies that includes intentional community organizing, media advocacy, policy development, research and data, and enforcement to create widespread, sustainable changes in communities.

The project is based on the premise that drinking and driving, binge drinking and underage drinking are products of *both* individual choices and contextual factors that strongly influence behavior. Therefore, they require a collective response that focuses not only on individual behavior, but also on community norms and standards.

We are on the
Web:
www.MTCCP.info

Distinguishing Environmental Prevention from Other Forms of Prevention

Environmental Prevention involves changing the environment in which alcohol-related problems such as drinking and driving, binge drinking and underage drinking occur. But what does it mean to “change the environment?” One way to explain the concept of Environmental Prevention is to first identify what it is *not*.

- It is *not* focused on changing individual behavior(s) through education and treatment.
- It is *not* “prohibition” of alcohol in the community.
- It is *not* condemning those who drink or sell alcohol responsibly.
- It is *not* eliminating personal responsibility for those whose behavior causes damage or injury to others.

Instead, the Environmental Prevention approach works to modify community conditions that condone and/or encourage unhealthy and unsafe behaviors.

Environmental Prevention requires a new way of thinking on the part of prevention professionals. In this case it involves:

- Rejecting the assumption that, “We can’t change things because this is how it is, and always will be!”
- Critically examining those aspects of our society that support or sustain alcohol-related problems.

“Environmental Prevention is not focused on changing individual behavior through education and treatment.”

- A willingness to do things differently.
- Insisting that policy makers and law enforcement work together with community groups so changes will have significant and sustainable effects on the problem.
- Holding accountable all those who profit from irresponsible alcohol sales and use.
- Supporting those responsible for making and enforcing alcohol-related laws/policies.
- No longer solely blaming kids for underage drinking and related problems.

Ultimately, Environmental Prevention is based on the fact that people’s behavior is powerfully shaped by their environment. Environmental Prevention considers four areas of concern or causal factors: social availability of alcohol, retail availability of alcohol, criminal justice, and promotion of alcohol.

Environmental Prevention targets entire communities rather than individuals. That way, it has the potential to bring about enduring reductions in the problems. Still, it is not a quick fix; it may require several

years or even a generation to see the changes occur, but these changes are generally permanent and dramatic.

Just look at the change in public attitudes toward seatbelts and smoking. Environmental Prevention campaigns related to both these issues have created a dramatic cultural shift in thinking and behavior that has had a positive effect on public health and safety throughout the United States.

Causal factors addressed through Environmental Prevention

- **Social Availability of Alcohol:** This is primarily associated with underage drinking where alcohol is provided by private individuals or at home parties, kegs, etc.
- **Retail Availability of Alcohol:** This covers sales to underage youth and over service or sales to already intoxicated persons.
- **Criminal Justice:** This includes examining the effectiveness of existing alcohol-related laws, identifying gaps in laws, considering enforcement and adjudication issues, etc.
- **Promotion of Alcohol:** This involves alcohol advertising, product placement in stores, drink specials, etc.

Implementing Environmental Prevention in Communities

Environmental Prevention is generally implemented in a community through a campaign. These efforts involve a combination of five strategies: applied data and research, intentional organizing, media advocacy, policy and enforcement. With these strategies in place, it's possible to successfully address a wide range of public health and safety issues from an environmental perspective. To be successful each of the five strategies must be used; however, they may be applied differently in order to meet the unique needs of individual communities.

Applied Data & Research

Applied data and research means using local data to identify the needs of a community and the problems that need to be addressed. Data and research then can be used to identify evidence-based solutions to these problems. Environmental prevention professionals use this evidence to set realistic goals, then rely on data to evaluate progress. Data collection is central to current campaigns, and future efforts. Because the successes and failures of today become the evidence used to guide the projects of tomorrow. It's a snowballing process, and the result is real, measurable change.

Intentional Organizing

Intentional organizing means bringing together key community members concerned with the problems and helping them mobilize to create change. This involves teaching community members about the issues at hand, sharing the best available data with them and providing guidance as they identify solutions that they think will work in their communities.

Policy

Policies create standards of behavioral expectations; they make it easier to engage in healthy and safe behaviors and harder to engage in unhealthy and unsafe behaviors. This involves reviewing existing laws, practices and procedures related to target problems. And from this work will come new, more effective policies.



Some Policies Designed to Reduce Alcohol-Related Problems:

- Alcohol outlet density restrictions
- Mandatory training for people who sell or serve alcohol
- Restrictions on alcohol sales at community events
- Social host laws that hold people accountable for providing alcohol to underage youth
- Age restrictions for alcohol servers
- Alcohol taxes designed to fund new policy and prevention work.

Media Advocacy

Media advocacy uses the news to raise awareness of a problem on the public agenda. But media advocacy aspires to do more than bring attention to specific issues. The goal is to change a community's commonly held

perceptions about a problem *and* make it politically possible to implement specific solutions. This is done by strategically influencing media in ways that alter the political environment surrounding an issue.

Effective media advocacy utilizes quotes from authentic community members who genuinely understand and care about truly fixing problems. Media advocacy is not public relations. Rather, media advocacy focuses on crafting change in the community through education and the pressure of citizens who are willing to take a stand to advance initiatives. At every step, media advocacy aspires to keep the momentum moving toward clearly set strategic goals.

Enforcement

The enforcement component of Environmental Prevention ensures consistent application of new and/or existing policies. Many times the level of enforcement in a community will be dictated by community norms. If a community views underage drinking as a right of passage, law enforcement is less likely to strongly enforce underage drinking laws. Community advocates can support local, state, federal law enforcement agencies and the judicial system through strategic partnerships that will ensure enforcement of policies.

Examples of strong collaboration with local enforcement agencies:

- Community partners with law enforcement to deliver alcohol compliance trainings.
- Law enforcement shares data with community group, which makes sure it is reflected in local news stories.
- Community group promotes community support for law enforcement.
- Community group works to make enforcement operations visible to the public as a deterrent.

The Montana Community Change Project uses an Environmental Prevention approach to address binge drinking and drinking and driving by youth and adults. This involves strategies designed to:

- Reduce youth access to alcohol through retail and social sources.
- Encourage alcohol retailers to comply with existing laws that prohibit the sale of alcohol to obviously intoxicated customers.
- Reduce youth access to alcohol at community events and binge drinking at community events.
- Strengthen the criminal justice system by strengthening laws.
- Increase DUI enforcement and minor in possession laws.
- Make enforcement and adjudication of alcohol-related crime more visible.
- Encourage the swift and consistent adjudication of alcohol-related offenses.

NOTE: *Partial list.*

For more information about the
Montana Community Change Project
email MTinfo@publicstrategies.org
or visit www.mtccp.info