

Addressing Underage Drinking Through Environmental Prevention

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) offers support to organizations across the Nation to host Town Hall Meetings that will help mobilize their communities around the reduction and prevention of underage drinking. The focus of the 2012 events is on the use of environmental prevention to make alcohol less available and appealing to young people. Goals of environmental prevention include changing social norms or attitudes relating to the use of alcohol, controlling the availability of alcohol, and strengthening enforcement of laws and regulations governing its use. The following are nine evidence-based ways to implement environmental prevention.

Responsible Beverage Service

Responsible beverage service (RBS) programs target both on- and off-premises alcohol retailers and are designed to reduce sales to minors and intoxicated adults. RBS helps to eliminate lax enforcement of minimum legal drinking age laws by merchants as well as servers' lack of familiarity with State and local restrictions on alcohol service, failure to recognize false identification, and continued service to intoxicated patrons.

Alcohol Compliance Checks

Alcohol compliance checks deter alcohol outlets from selling alcohol to underage youth. Law enforcement officials supervise undercover youth who attempt to purchase alcohol; if the attempt is successful, the alcohol outlet is penalized. Compliance checks are thought to be most effective when they are frequent, well publicized, and well designed.

Happy Hour Restrictions

Alcohol promotions may encourage underage drinking by making alcohol more affordable and appealing. Happy hour restrictions are aimed at reducing the tragic consequences of overconsumption by limiting drink promotions, such as reduced pricing during specific days or times, free beverages or unlimited beverages at a set price and time, increased drink volume, and drinks offered as prizes.

Controls on Alcohol Outlet Location and Density

Areas with higher alcohol outlet density have been shown to have higher levels of heavy drinking and alcohol-related problems, including violence, crime, alcohol-involved traffic crashes, and injuries. Alcohol outlet location and density control applies regulatory authority, implemented through licensing or zoning processes, to reduce or limit the number of alcohol outlets in a given area.¹ Reducing the density of alcohol outlets can result in fewer drinking-related problems.

Sobriety/Traffic Safety Checkpoints

"Sobriety checkpoints are traffic stops where law enforcement officers systematically select drivers to assess their level of alcohol impairment. The goal of these interventions is to deter alcohol-impaired driving by increasing drivers' perceived risk of arrest."² Combined with a vigorous awareness campaign, checkpoints tend to decrease alcohol-related traffic crashes and fatalities among youth.

¹Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (N.D.). Preventing excessive alcohol consumption: Regulation of alcohol outlet density. *Guide to Community Preventive Services*. From <http://www.thecommunityguide.org/alcohol/outletdensity.html> (accessed January 18, 2012).

²Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (N.D.). Research update: Sobriety checkpoints are effective in reducing alcohol-related crashes. From http://www.cdc.gov/MotorVehicleSafety/Impaired_Driving/checkpoint.html (accessed December 12, 2011).

Graduated Driver Licensing Laws

Graduated driver license laws are designed to gradually introduce new young drivers to different driving circumstances, such as transporting passengers or driving at night. Usually, these laws allow beginners to gain experience driving as they move from a highly supervised permit to a supervised license with restrictions and then to a full-privileged driver's license. Graduated driver licensing laws help prevent conditions under which young people may be at increased risk of alcohol-related traffic injuries or death; such a law may limit their driving between midnight and 3 a.m., during which time 55 percent of drivers involved in fatal crashes were alcohol impaired.

Social Host Liability Laws

Social host liability laws try to prevent youth from obtaining alcohol from older adults (e.g., parents, siblings, and friends). Social host laws hold noncommercial servers of alcohol, such as homeowners or parents, liable in the event that they provide alcohol to a minor or an obviously inebriated individual whose alcohol use later contributes to injury or death to a third party. The extent of these laws varies from State to State, however; research has shown that these laws are associated with reductions in heavy drinking and with drinking and driving. One study found that social host liability laws reduced the drunk driving fatality rate among 18- to 20-year-olds by 9 percent. These laws have the potential to effectively reduce underage drinking, as well as its consequences, by encouraging adults to think twice before purchasing alcohol for youth or allowing underage youth to drink in their homes.

Restricted Sales of Alcohol at Public Events

Alcohol restrictions at public events include the implementation of policies, voluntary or mandated by local legislation, which control the availability and use of alcohol at concerts, street fairs, sporting games, tailgate parties, and other public venues. Tighter controls on alcohol availability have been shown to reduce underage drinking by protecting youth from access to alcohol at public events. Some evidence indicates that sales restrictions at public events also may reduce alcohol-related problems, such as traffic crashes, vandalism, fighting, and other public disturbances.

Increased Taxes on Sales of Alcohol

The overall price of alcohol affects how much people will consume, which, in turn, affects the number of alcohol-related problems they will cause or experience. The primary way to make alcohol more expensive, and therefore discourage consumption, is by increasing taxes on it. Research indicates that raising the alcohol excise tax results in benefits, such as reduced medical costs, that substantially outweigh the costs of implementing a tax increase.

2012 Town Hall Meetings—Anyone can help; all are needed.

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