

Partnering in the Battle to End the Underage Drinking Problem

By Neal Holtan, M.D.

Among a variety of intervention strategies we need for most public health problems, environmental change strategies strike many experts as particularly useful in substance abuse prevention because of these strategies' proven and lasting effectiveness. However, despite environmental interventions gaining popularity, they are extremely challenging to accomplish because of the difficulty in creating true social change.

Entrenched economic interests in communities resist even minor change. Many parents also resist change, maintaining an unquestioning belief that underage drinking is a rite of passage that cannot be stopped.

In every instance of success in environmental programs to prevent underage drinking, the key ingredient is always the creation of healthy and effective partnerships between those who want change and strive to promote and protect health. Partnership Continuum, Inc. is very successful in using partnership formation as the basis for solving problems in business settings as well as in [public health](#).

Teaming up with my colleague Dr. Ousmane Diallo, an epidemiologist at the Iowa Department of Public Health, we presented a workshop session at "Celebrating Healthy Communities," the Iowa Governor's Public Health Conference held August 2, 2007, at Drake University in Des Moines. Our workshop, "Partnerships to Reduce Underage Drinking," fell squarely within the "barn raising" tradition of community cooperation in early America.

Historically, barn raising was the act of community members pooling their efforts to build barns together in a much shorter period than if done by a few. The barn raisers worked together as a large but close community that highlighted teamwork, cooperation, and partnership. The resulting barns were a cause for community celebration, and they still dot the landscape as a reminder of Iowa and other states' heritage of community building and resourceful problem solving.

At the barn raising conference, held every two years since 1995, Dr. Diallo and I used the [Six Partnering Attributes](#) that underlie the [partnering model](#) of Partnership Continuum, Inc. as the basis for suggesting ways that strong community partnerships can be used to address the public health problem of underage alcohol drinking.

More than 800 people attended the conference, representing 94 of Iowa's 99 counties and several adjacent states. The event kicked off with speeches by Iowa Governor Chester Culver and by Dr. Julie Gerberding, Director of the Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia. Two days of workshops brought together experts from many areas of public health to talk about solutions to shared health problems.

Dr. Diallo presented the epidemiology of alcohol consumption among persons under 21 years of age in Iowa and described data that demonstrate the consequences of underage drinking in terms of adverse impacts on health, safety, well-being, social structures, and family units. He compared Iowa's data with that for the nation as a whole and emphasized that Iowa youth are among the five states ranking highest in underage alcohol consumption, including high rates of binge drinking as young as students in the sixth grade of school.

The workshop presentation then moved to my discussion of interventions to address the problem such as evidence-based strategies to change the social and cultural setting within which underage drinking exists and is tolerated. I featured Iowa success stories such as the unique Alliance of Coalitions for Change (AC4C) that unites prevention workers in community coalitions that are trying to make change at the local level by engaging groups and individuals as partners in change.

The presentation emphasized environmental change strategies that seek to establish or change community standards, codes, and attitudes associated with a problem such as underage drinking. This approach is necessary because our shared social environment—namely our commercial establishments, work sites, schools, social organizations—and our mass culture, greatly influences us in healthy or unhealthy ways. Environmental strategies seek to change the shared environment for the better.

We can categorize environmental changes in a number of ways. In the example of underage access to alcohol, changes can fall into the categories of:

- Reducing availability of alcohol
- Fighting social norms such as acceptance of drinking by youth
- Creating policies and regulations to control or punish youth drinking
- Enforcing laws prohibiting underage consumption of alcohol or the provision of alcohol to minors

Interventions, therefore, can address social access to alcohol, commercial access to alcohol, and the role of community institutions in setting the norms and practices surrounding underage drinking.

There are roles in partnering to achieve such changes for schools, hotels, faith-based organizations, parents, police, work sites, and other social structures. Strategies for change can include the roles and efforts of coalitions, community organizers, advocacy groups, and lobbyists.

Partnership Continuum's experts are available for presentations, training events, and technical assistance to businesses, not-for-profit organizations, governments and

organizations seeking assistance and proven success in how to achieve objectives through partnering relationships in any situation.

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