

Grant Results Topic Summary: **The Environmental Approach to Preventing Substance Abuse**

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Between 1989 and 2006 the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) invested more than \$400 million in efforts to prevent substance abuse (including underage drinking). That work explored two basic approaches—**behavioral**, which focuses on individuals' behavior—and environmental, which focuses on communities and attempts to change the environment that supports substance abuse.

This report describes the results, findings and lessons learned from RWJF-supported programs and projects that used environmental approaches to preventing substance abuse, especially by youth.

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Introduction

See also the [Grant Results Topic Summary: The Behavioral Approach to Preventing Substance Abuse](#).

Nearly half of American high school students have tried an illicit drug by the time they graduate.¹ Drug and alcohol abuse costs the United States an estimated \$346 billion each year.²

Given recent scientific knowledge about the biological and neurological causes of addiction, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) considers addiction to be a chronic health condition. As such, it should be treated like other chronic conditions with proven and accessible prevention and treatment methods.

Since 2001 RWJF's work related to substance abuse has focused on improving substance abuse treatment and expanding access to treatment.

Although in 2007 RWJF supports a number of programs to improve the quality of addiction treatment, Foundation program staff does not envision making new investments in the specific area of quality of addiction treatment once these programs are completed.

Substance abuse prevention usually follows one of two basic approaches—*behavioral*, which focuses on individuals' behavior, or *environmental*, which focuses on communities and attempts to change the environment that supports substance abuse.

This report describes the results, findings and lessons learned from RWJF-supported efforts that used environmental approaches to preventing substance abuse, especially by youth.

Behavioral prevention efforts focus on educating individuals. The theory has been that if people have the facts about the potential

harm of alcohol and drugs to themselves and others, they may decide not to drink or use drugs.

But research has shown that education alone is often ineffective. Programs that try to persuade students not to use alcohol by arousing fear do not work, according to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. Instead, emphasizing the dangers of alcohol may attract adolescents who are risk-takers.

Another approach to preventing underage drinking and drug use at any age seeks to change the environment that supports substance abuse. While education is included, these programs primarily look to change the factors that influence people to abuse mind-altering substances, such as easy access to alcohol and the failure to penalize illegal drug use.

Environmental interventions include:

- Building support for **public policies** that reduce access to alcohol, illegal drugs and other mind-altering substances.
- Creating **community coalitions** to develop local solutions to reducing access.
- Using **the media** to highlight the problem of substance abuse and build support for community-based solutions.

1 National Institute on Drug Abuse, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Monitoring the Future Survey, Overview of Key Findings: 2006*. Available at www.monitoringthefuture.org/pubs/monographs/overview2006.pdf.

2 National Institute on Drug Abuse, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Drug Abuse and Addiction: One of America's Most Challenging Public Health Problems*. Available at www.nida.nih.gov/about/welcome/aboutdrugabuse/index.html.

Public Policies to Prevent Substance Abuse

OTHER SUBSTANCE ABUSE PUBLIC POLICY PREVENTION PROJECTS

- > A policy demonstration project in Oregon. (See Grant Results on [ID# 044660](#).)
- > Prevention policy research. (See Grant Results on [ID# 045762](#) and the [ImpactTeen Web site](#).)
- > A national organization connecting local providers with national developments. (See SAAS's [Web site](#).)

RWJF has supported projects that built support for prevention policies and helped government regulators enforce existing laws.

HIGHLIGHTS

State Prevention Policy. Most state-level drug and alcohol policy focus on crime and the apprehension of criminals. The Embedding Prevention in State Policy and Practice Initiative assisted six states in reorienting their policy framework away from criminal justice toward prevention. (See Grant Results on [ID# 043858](#).)

Accomplishments in the six states included:

- The Arizona Prevention Resource Center developed resources for community-based prevention providers, including a [Web site](#).
- The State of Connecticut created a prevention council.
- The Oregon state legislature passed legislation calling for state agencies and local communities to work together to provide comprehensive, coordinated services to children and families.

Support for Local Advocacy. From 1991 to 2000, [Join Together](#), a project of the Boston University School of Public Health, assisted community-based groups in their efforts to reduce, prevent and improve treatment of substance abuse. Join Together provided technical assistance, convened conferences, conducted survey research and provided advocacy leadership training. Since 2000, Join Together's focus has shifted from prevention to treatment. (See Grant Results on [ID# 027954](#). See also Grant Results on [ID# 040938](#) for a similar technical assistance effort that supported local advocacy groups working to prevent underage drinking.)

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Public policies help reduce substance abuse.** Effective policies include reducing alcohol billboards and other advertisements, requiring beer kegs to be registered, and making changes to zoning laws to reduce the concentration of bars and restaurants in certain neighborhoods. (See Grant Results on [ID# 032190](#) and [ID# 031603](#).)
- **Get buy-in from local law enforcement.** Law enforcement buy-in is crucial to overall credibility with the public. If police are not seen enforcing drug and alcohol laws, then the law is not taken seriously. (See Grant Results on [ID# 032694](#).)
- **Coordinate policy and media advocacy.** A consistent media and awareness campaign is essential to reinforce policies. (See Grant Results on [ID# 032694](#).)
- **Grassroots advocacy groups need help.** Provide grassroots groups with a broad range of assistance and support to help them be successful educators on the local level. Groups need advocacy tools including, but not limited to polling, economic analysis, statistics and legal support. (See Grant Results on [ID# 040938](#).)
- **Tailor advocacy assistance to local needs.** When providing assistance to local organizations, be flexible with your programming to accommodate community needs and logistical capabilities. One national technical assistance provider found that its formal training sessions were too rigid for some grassroots community organizations. (See Grant Results on [ID# 040938](#).)

Building Coalitions to Prevent Substance Abuse

OTHER COALITION-BUILDING PREVENTION PROJECTS

- > *The Urban Health Initiative*, which is helping five cities implement systemic changes to improve the lives of children. (See the *Urban Health Initiative Web site*.)
- > Three projects that provided technical assistance to community coalitions. (See Grant Results on [ID# 020021](#), [ID# 023195](#) and [ID# 040938](#).)
- > Two community coalitions, in Pennsylvania and Arizona. (See Grant Results on [ID# 029558](#) and [ID# 040553](#).)
- > A national effort to build a parent drug prevention coalition. (See Grant Results on [ID# 028819](#).)
- > A national center offering assistance to colleges and communities fighting substance abuse on campus. (See the center's [Web site](#).)

Another way to reduce access to alcohol and drugs is to build coalitions of community organizations to develop local solutions.

RWJF supported four national programs—*Fighting Back*®, *Free to Grow*, *A Matter of Degree* and *Reducing Underage Drinking through Coalitions*—that helped communities build local coalitions of government, health care providers, schools, businesses and community groups to address the problem of substance abuse.

Coalitions worked together to reduce access in their communities to alcohol, illegal drugs and other mind-altering substances.

(For more information on how RWJF has used coalitions to bring about social change, see “[Engaging Coalitions to Improve Health and Health Care](#),” by Laura C. Leviton and Elaine F. Cassidy.)

HIGHLIGHTS

Fighting Back. A \$72.6-million program that ran from 1989 to 2002, *Fighting Back* helped mid-sized cities address drug problems through a community-wide approach. Coalitions of businesses, health care organizations, public schools, government agencies, police, community groups, local media and clergy worked together to develop local solutions to substance abuse.

Programming in the 14 funded communities varied, but included elements such as:

- Community policing
- Workplace programs
- Public awareness campaigns
- Youth alternative recreation
- Neighborhood graffiti clean-up
- Code enforcement

An evaluation of the program after 10 years found that it supported pre-selected community coalitions with ample

technical assistance and direction from top-notch people. Still, the evaluation found that the program did not produce robust results in terms of decreasing substance abuse. One conclusion is that community coalitions *alone* are not a sufficient solution to the substance abuse problem.

At the same time, *Fighting Back* did demonstrate some positive results: The program effectively built coalitions. And residents of *Fighting Back* communities displayed greater awareness of substance abuse treatment options.

The *Fighting Back* evaluation also found that substance abuse problems in the inner-city sites were not dramatically worse than in the suburbs. Illegal drug supply is high in urban neighborhoods, but much of the demand comes from outside. (See Grant Results on [Fighting Back](#).)

Free to Grow: Head Start Partnerships for Substance-Free Communities. RWJF's *Free to Grow* program leveraged the infrastructure of federal Head Start preschool programs to develop community-based substance abuse and child abuse prevention programs in low-income communities. The program began in 1994 and ended in 2006.

Though coordinated through Head Start sites, *Free to Grow* was not a curricular intervention. It built community partnerships between Head Start and school districts, police departments, municipalities and other community organizations to develop targeted solutions for communities. Program strategies targeted the young child's overall environment, not the child.

With technical assistance and guidance from the national program office, individual *Free to Grow* communities developed and implemented their own projects. For example:

- **Barre, Vt.** *Free to Grow* provided services to families in the low-income Highgate housing complex. Barre has high rates of alcohol and drug abuse, in part due to the isolation of the community and long winter months. *Free to Grow* emphasized the development of social networks. Bringing parents together

on *Free to Grow* committees and in special training sessions and support groups increased their sense of community engagement. *Free to Grow's* Family Service Center within the Highgate community worked with families on issues such as economic self-sufficiency, literacy and substance abuse. (See a profile of [Barre Free to Grow](#).)

- **New Britain, Conn.** This *Free to Grow* coalition implemented a three-tiered system to identify families with risk of substance abuse, domestic violence or mental health problems. Families in the highest-risk group were referred to a case management team that followed up with the families regularly. (See a profile of [New Britain Free to Grow](#).)

An evaluation of the first phase of *Free to Grow* found that participants showed improved parenting skills and bonding between children and their parents. There were small changes observed in reducing domestic violence and the use of drugs and alcohol; the time period was too short to determine long-term outcomes. An evaluation of the second phase will be completed in December 2007. (See Grant Results on *Free to Grow* and additional profiles of *Free to Grow* in [Wausau, Wis.](#) and [St. Mary's Parish, La.](#))

A Matter of Degree. Ten universities are developing coalitions with their communities to reduce alcohol abuse among college campuses with assistance from *A Matter of Degree*, an \$8.6-million, seven-year program supported by RWJF. These university-community coalitions are identifying and addressing the environmental factors that converge to encourage alcohol abuse, such as alcohol advertising and marketing, institutional policies and practices, local ordinances, and social and cultural beliefs and behaviors. Preliminary evaluation results suggest that the more environmental interventions are used at participating universities, the more likely they are to see reductions in alcohol consumption and its related harms. (See the [Anthology chapter](#) and the [evaluation report](#).)

Reducing Underage Drinking Through Coalitions (RUDC).

addressed the problem of underage drinking by developing statewide coalitions that advocated for a variety of policies and activities to reduce youth access to alcohol. The program funded projects in 10 states, plus Puerto Rico and Washington, D.C. (See Grant Results on [RUDC](#).)

The coalitions sought to:

- Improve enforcement of laws prohibiting alcohol sales to minors.
- Reduce the availability of alcohol at sporting and community events.
- Build support for statewide keg registration laws that hold keg purchasers responsible if minors are served.
- Tighten ID checks, train alcohol beverage servers, and reduce the use of special pricing that encourages over-consumption.
- Train youth leaders, who served as media spokespersons and testified before state legislatures about the harm of underage drinking.
- Build support for ordinances to increase the distance of billboards advertising alcohol from schools, churches and rehabilitation centers.

An evaluation of the program found that the coalitions made an impact on underage drinking in their communities. Successes included:

- **Media coverage.** Coalition states showed significant increases in media coverage of underage drinking.
- **Social access policies.** Coalitions effectively fought for social access policies, which reduce access to alcohol in social situations. Examples of social access policies are beer keg registration, alcohol use restrictions on public property, alcohol restrictions at community events and holding adults liable for serving minors alcohol.

- **Alcohol policy measures.** The coalitions had no significant effect upon alcohol policy measures in other areas: commercial access, alcohol marketing, policies addressing youth alcohol consumption, alcohol pricing/taxes and other alcohol issues.
- **Youth drinking.** Some youth drinking measures showed statistically significant greater declines in coalition states than in non-coalition states. Coalition and non-coalition states began at almost the same levels of youth drinking and the frequency of youth drinking decreased at a faster rate among coalition states than non-coalition states.
- **Drinking and driving.** The decline in the number of times that a youth drove a car after drinking in the past two weeks was significantly larger in coalition states than non-coalition states. Other measures of alcohol-related driving and car crashes showed similar declines in the coalition and non-coalition states.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Community coalitions can effectively unite to conduct substance abuse-prevention programs and influence prevention policy.** Successful coalitions included Latino community organizations in San Jose, Calif., and a coalition in Baltimore that advocated for and won city ordinances banning alcohol and tobacco billboards. (See Grant Results on [ID# 020021](#) and [ID# 032190](#).)
- **Communities were much more likely to rally for issues surrounding quality of life and economic development than alcohol and drug use.** The most successful coalitions demonstrated clear links between the problems surrounding alcohol and tobacco, and the community's quality of life and opportunities for economic development. (See Grant Results on [ID# 020021](#).)
- **Community coalitions need to measure their results in reducing drug use.** Some community coalitions have tracked and documented local results, including reductions in underage drinking and illegal drug use. Other coalitions, however, need training and technical assistance in strengthening their outcome and measurement systems. (See Grant Results on [ID# 036494](#).)
- **Collaborations between advocacy groups and government agencies pose special challenges.** An advocacy group is often able to work quickly and flexibly to meet changing needs while government agencies are typically much more bureaucratic and slower to move forward. (See Grant Results on [ID# 034123](#).)
- **Community coalitions alone are not a sufficient solution to the substance abuse problem.** Evaluators of *Fighting Back* found evidence that attention to community coalition formation actually *inhibited* actions in pursuit of the main goal of the program—reducing substance abuse. (See Grant Results on [Fighting Back](#).)
- **A specific set of partners is necessary for sites to implement a community-wide program and analyze its effects.** Specific public and private agencies—such as local government, schools and hospitals—must collaborate to implement anti-drug programs and measure their effects. It is important, however, not to have too many people at the table. (See Grant Results on [Fighting Back](#).)
- **Coalitions with diverse membership must find ways to surmount pre-existing mistrust of establishment-based organizations.** “Given the serious schisms and rifts between white, middle-class-based organizations and African-American, working-class and underclass organizations and leaders that are prevalent” in most of the *Fighting Back* sites evaluators studied, “an approach that ignores social class divisions and ethnic mistrust is unlikely to be successful.” (See Grant Results on [Fighting Back](#).)

- **Effective coalitions share certain characteristics.** The *Fighting Back* evaluators found that a coalition’s ability to respond to a community problem (such as substance abuse) is related to factors such as its financial resources, lead agency, governance and leadership. (See Grant Results on [Fighting Back](#).)
- **Enlist the support of agencies by offering to help them.** *Healthy Nations* projects made inroads with other agencies and community organizations by consistently showing up at their meetings and offering assistance. As a result, *Healthy Nations* easily gained support from that organization when conducting activities. (See Grant Results on [Healthy Nations](#).)
- **Maximize available resources by coordinating efforts across agencies and disciplines.** More linkages among concerned agencies would foster improved collaborations. (See Grant Results on [ID# 030076](#) and [ID# 039287](#).)
- **Ensure that coalitions receive assistance early on to learn about policy change and advocacy work.** Some coalition members are more accustomed to working directly “on the ground” rather than at the level of public policy and advocacy. (See Grant Results on [RUDC](#).)
- **Pick a few policies (three or less, if possible) and focus on getting results in those areas.** Coalitions that focused on just a few policies and were disciplined about not getting drawn into every alcohol-related issue showed more results than coalitions that had a long laundry list of hoped-for changes. (See Grant Results on [RUDC](#).)
- **Involve target audiences—such as youth, parents, minorities—in project strategy and planning.** Some coalitions in the *Reducing Underage Drinking through Coalitions* program involved youth but they did not allow them to participate in developing project strategy and planning. As a result, youth often felt like they were being used. (See Grant Results on [RUDC](#).)

OTHER MEDIA ADVOCACY PREVENTION PROJECTS

- > Public awareness campaigns on underage drinking, binge drinking and substance abuse in Native American communities. (See Grant Results on [ID# 049824](#), [ID# 032621](#), [ID# 037026](#) and [Healthy Nations](#).)
- > A marketing plan for a substance-free Hispanic market in Los Angeles. (See Grant Results on [ID# 048592](#).)

The media can be a powerful tool to build support for policies and programs that change the environment that supports substance abuse. RWJF has supported a number of projects to raise public awareness of the dangers of substance abuse.

HIGHLIGHTS

Safe Night USA. On June 5, 1999 a million youth in a thousand cities participated in the first national Safe Night USA, which raised awareness of substance abuse and violence. Local events included dances, stage entertainment, karaoke, sports events and swimming parties. The event was simulcast on national television and viewed by more than 1 million people. (See Grant Results on [ID# 032056](#).)

“Choose or Lose” on MTV. More than 2 million people watched the premiere of MTV’s 2004 “Choose or Lose: Drug Wars” episode, which explored how the intersection of drug addiction, drug abuse and the justice system impacts young people. (See Grant Results on [ID# 051671](#).)

“Moyers on Addiction”. A five-hour series on addiction and recovery hosted by Bill Moyers addressed tobacco, alcohol and illicit drug addictions, and examined scientific advances, treatment and prevention possibilities, and public policy issues. The series ran three consecutive nights in March 1998 on public television stations nationally, and drew an average of 5.6 million viewers per night. (See Grant Results on [ID# 034179](#).)

LESSONS LEARNED

- **National campaigns can help local efforts.** Use centralized national campaigns to help focus local attention on underage drinking-prevention issues. Local efforts have a harder time gaining traction without a national spotlight shining on an issue. (See Grant Results on [ID# 040938](#).)
- **Provide help to local partners.** Local partners need a lot of help from national organizations to sustain a national campaign locally. National organizations with local affiliates need to provide technical and/or financial assistance to affiliates and local partners. (See Grant Results on [ID# 038126](#).)
- **Make sure national and local efforts target the same audiences.** One national campaign combined local events with a national television broadcast. Local events were in white, Hispanic and Asian communities, while the national broadcast largely featured African-American venues and performers. (See Grant Results on [ID# 032056](#).)
- **Evaluating media efforts is hard.** A 2001 conference found that evaluation of media campaigns is difficult due to methodological problems. (See Grant Results on [ID# 042783](#).)