

Summary of Lessons Learned

Town Hall Meetings

Fall 2006

1. Wisconsin's adults have embraced alcohol industry messages about parent responsibility for underage drinking.
2. Culture matters. Wisconsin has a difficult alcohol environment, but perhaps not as difficult as residents perceive.
3. Wisconsin residents are unaware of effective community options to prevent and reduce underage drinking.
4. Action requires courage and is part of the civic infrastructure.
5. Frame the issue carefully to move from awareness to action.
6. Small communities of interest working in isolation can't change communities, broad based community groups can.

We extend our thanks and appreciation to the individual organizers of Wisconsin's Town Hall Meetings for their candor, cooperation, and steadfast belief that our communities can and will reduce underage alcohol use.

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University Health Services, University of Wisconsin-Madison

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Town Hall Meetings
Spring 2006

1. Media advocacy worked, but required a substantial amount of lead time.
2. Panel discussion promoted awareness, but not action.
3. Youth participation could be useful, but distracted attention from adult responses to underage alcohol use.
4. Weekday meetings targeting parents need to provide a light supper or snack.
5. Organizers were frustrated by a lack of peers.
6. Limiting the agenda to “awareness” limited effectiveness.

Wisconsin’s 2006 Town Hall Meetings
on Underage Drinking

Autumn 2006 Meetings

<i>September 20</i> Manitowoc	<i>October 24</i> River Falls
<i>October 11</i> Osseo Fairchild	<i>October 30</i> Gillett
<i>October 11</i> Dodgeville	<i>November 2</i> Onalaska
<i>October 16</i> Sawyer County Hayward	<i>November 2</i> Hortonville
<i>October 19</i> Grafton	<i>December 11</i> Wisconsin Rapids
<i>October 23</i> Rhinelander	

Spring 2006 Meetings

<i>March 23</i> Beaver Dam	<i>March 30</i> La Crosse
<i>March 24</i> Milwaukee	<i>April 4</i> Appleton
<i>March 26</i> Cassville	<i>April 12</i> Wausau
<i>March 27</i> Janesville	<i>April 18</i> Eagle River
<i>March 28</i> Plymouth	<i>May 4</i> Montello
<i>March 28</i> Birchwood	<i>May 11</i> Racine
<i>March 28</i> Keshena	<i>May 22</i> Green Bay
<i>March 28</i> Eau Claire	<i>May 30</i> Westfield
<i>March 28</i> Neopit	
<i>March 28</i> Elcho	
<i>March 28</i> Prairie du Chien	

¹⁰ “Family Talk About Drinking,” Anheuser-Busch, St. Louis, Missouri.

¹¹ *The Politics of Alcohol Policy Change*, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2006, page 7.

www.rwjf.org/files/publications/other/AlcoholPolicyChange.pdf

¹² Alcohol Policy Information System <http://alcoholpolicy.niaaa.nih.gov/>.

¹³ *The FACTS Toolkit*. Wisconsin Clearinghouse for Prevention Resources, 1999, page 21.

¹⁴ American Medical Association, Office of Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug Abuse Prevention, *The Politics of Alcohol Policy Change*, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2006, page 7.

www.rwjf.org/files/publications/other/AlcoholPolicyChange.pdf

¹⁵ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *The Surgeon General's Call to Action To Prevent and Reduce Underage Drinking 2007*. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General, 2007.

www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/underagedrinking/calltoaction.pdf

NOTES:

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. *A Comprehensive Plan for Preventing and Reducing Underage Drinking*. January 2006.

² National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. *Reducing Underage Drinking: A Collective Responsibility*. Committee on Developing a Strategy to Reduce and Prevent Underage Drinking, Richard J. Bonnie and Mary Ellen O'Connell, Editors. Board on Children, Youth and Families, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press, 2004.

³ *State of Wisconsin 2006 Epidemiological Profile Report*, Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services. Page 5.

⁴ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *The Surgeon General's Call to Action To Prevent and Reduce Underage Drinking 2007*, Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General, 2007, page vi.
www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/underagedrinking/calltoaction.pdf

⁵ The phrase “awareness to action” in this report is analogous to “precontemplation to contemplation” in stages of change theory. For a fuller explanation of that theory and the stages of change, read *Focus on Prevention*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Publication No. (SMA) 06-4120, 2006, page 12.
http://download.ncadi.samhsa.gov/prevline/pdfs/FocusOn_Layout_OPT.pdf
(copies available from the Wisconsin Clearinghouse – Item #PC022)

⁶ Beer Institute, “Mission Statement” accessed January 8, 2007
www.beerinstitute.org

⁷ American Medical Association, *Alcohol Industry 101: Its Structure & Organization*, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2004, page 21.
http://alcoholpolicyamd.com/pdf/AMA_Final_web_1.pdf

⁸ American Medical Association, *Alcohol Industry 101: Its Structure & Organization*, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2004. “Key Features of the Alcohol Industry,” inside front cover.
http://alcoholpolicyamd.com/pdf/AMA_Final_web_1.pdf

⁹ “Let’s Keep Talking: A Resource for Parents to Talk to Their Teens About Not Drinking,” Miller Brewing Company, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 2004.

CHANGE OF HEART: WISCONSIN’S TOWN HALL MEETINGS ON UNDERAGE DRINKING

In FY2002, Congress requested the study that became Reducing Underage Drinking: A Collective Responsibility, written by a distinguished group charged with creating a national strategy to prevent and reduce underage drinking.

When the final committee report was published by National Academies of Science, it initiated a national dialog about underage drinking, Wisconsin’s most pressing public health problem. Three years later, the Federal Interagency Coordinating Committee on the Prevention of Underage Drinking (ICCPUD) released Comprehensive Plan for Preventing and Reducing Underage Drinking,¹ moving the discussion from the theoretical to the practical.

Three basic goals were detailed: pursue opportunities to reduce the availability of alcohol to underage drinkers, reduce the occasions for underage drinking, and reduce demand for alcohol by underage youth.² Acknowledging that understanding the problem precedes local action, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services sponsored local “Town Hall Meetings” on underage drinking in over 1,500 communities, including in Wisconsin, from late March through May. *Start Talking Before They Start Drinking*, a federally coordinated effort to support local awareness efforts, targeted the final week of March 2006 for nationwide meetings.

Although a number of Wisconsin communities held Town Hall Meetings, many others found the short planning calendar, the uncertain availability of information or guidance, and spring break scheduling were insurmountable obstacles.

After interviewing community leaders about their experiences and difficulties, the Wisconsin Clearinghouse for Prevention Resources sponsored a second series of meetings in late 2006. The second group of ten meetings occurred during a three month period from September through December. The experience of meeting organizers and community members offers practical advice for all Wisconsin communities looking to prevent and reduce underage drinking.

WHY WISCONSIN IS CONCERNED

Underage drinking is a problem throughout the nation and is especially severe in Wisconsin. The Wisconsin Youth Risk Behavior Survey consistently finds alcohol use among Wisconsin youth above national averages. Even when the rate of binge alcohol use among high school students dropped nationally, there was no parallel drop in Wisconsin rates. In 2005, Wisconsin high school students reported the highest rate of current alcohol use in the nation and the fifth highest rate of binge drinking (31%).³ This undesirable ranking and media attention that followed may have raised local concern.

Organizing local, citizen-driven forums to discuss underage drinking initiated a public dialog and created an opportunity for communities to explore policies and practices to reduce underage drinking.

2007 TOWN HALL MEETINGS ON UNDERAGE DRINKING

Wisconsin's 2006 Town Hall Meetings on Underage Drinking initially established a base of concern and demonstrated many communities are ready to move rapidly from awareness to action. The discussions showed people are unaware of effective local options and view Wisconsin's social and legal environment as hostile to any change for the better. Town Hall Meetings can serve as a gateway to both heightened community awareness and the beginning of community action with a modest financial investment. *The Surgeon General's Call to Action To Prevent and Reduce Underage Drinking*,¹⁵ released in March 2007, suggests underage drinking will be an ongoing national priority, with funding to continue this effort.

CONTINUING WORK BY THE WISCONSIN CLEARINGHOUSE FOR PREVENTION RESOURCES

The Wisconsin Clearinghouse for Prevention Resources, along with its Wisconsin Regional Alcohol and other Drug Abuse Awareness Resource Network Centers will continue to provide leadership in the fight to stop underage drinking throughout Wisconsin. Targeted efforts in 2007 include: expanded website resources, a dedicated listserv to support community efforts to reduce underage drinking, regional trainings, and technical assistance for communities working to reduce underage alcohol use.

In addition the Wisconsin Clearinghouse will continue to develop relevant free material, including this report, summarizing Wisconsin successes and lessons learned. Wisconsin Clearinghouse staff participate in statewide initiatives, such as the State Incentive Grant (SIG), the State Council on Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse (SCAODA), the SIG Underage Drinking Prevention Committee and the SIG Prevention Committee.

6. Small communities of interest working in isolation can't change communities, broad based community groups can.

Wisconsin, unlike many other states, places a significant amount of responsibility for alcohol prevention on an already stretched educational system. That reliance assures educator sensitivity to the problem of early alcohol use but can insulate other community groups from the problem. The resulting conundrum was illustrated at some meetings.

Communities which focused their outreach efforts on other educators and parents through school communication channels had limited success. Other professional interests and networks, tapped primarily as presenters and not included in outreach efforts or media advocacy, were not engaged and those meetings experienced difficulty moving from awareness to action regardless of the number of attendees. Many educators are outstanding community advocates, but that is an individual trait and not an inherent quality of all educators.

One educator decided not to include her professional colleagues and instead recruited other interest groups into the planning process which dismayed her colleagues. Nevertheless, that meeting was a catalyst for community action. Her success and similar experiences demonstrate the potential for cross disciplinary coalitions under favorable conditions. Incentives for broad based community coalitions and disincentives for efforts with a narrower base may support similar outreach efforts.

LESSONS FROM 2006 SPRING MEETINGS

Four themes emerged from one-on-one interviews with spring meeting coordinators after their events:

1. Media advocacy worked, but required a substantial amount of lead time.
The materials created by the U.S. Department of Health and Social Services supported initial media outreach but didn't support a continuing discussion with the local media. Communities with established media relationships received coverage before and after the event. Without a pre-existing relationship, media attention was cursory or absent.
2. Panel discussions promoted awareness, but not action.
Raising public awareness about underage drinking was the stated goal of early meetings, but organizers found it was difficult to recapture the momentum for action at subsequent meetings.
3. Youth participation could be useful, but it also distracted attention from adult responses to underage alcohol use. The most effective options to reduce underage drinking require adult action.
Youth panels and performances often consumed a huge amount of the organizers' limited time. As the Surgeon General notes:

*"...responsibility for the prevention and reduction of underage drinking extends beyond the parents of adolescents, their, schools, and communities. It is the collective responsibility of the Nation as a whole and of each of us individually."*⁴

4. Weekday meetings targeting parents need to provide a light supper or snack to enable parents to attend. The travel distances in rural areas almost require organizers to offer a light meal when a significant number of potential attendees must travel a distance to attend.
5. Organizers expressed a sense of isolation and frustration caused by the lack of a readily available peer group. Some collaborative circles developed, usually within professional circles.
6. Limiting the agenda to awareness limited effectiveness. Some groups wanted to move beyond awareness and begin organizing community action, beyond the stated scope of discussion. Organizers said they regretted allowing that energy to dissipate and reported attempts to regain the lost momentum failed.

Some meetings moved directly from presentations into discussion with mixed results. Small discussion groups and cued agendas promoted thoughtful discussion among community members. In River Falls, after the panelists spoke, organizers broke the meeting into small discussion groups assigned three questions. The third question asked each group what they (as individuals) would do to reduce underage drinking in the community.

Panels provided new and useful information to attendees, but exchanges among community members and action steps were the result of a free flowing discussion. Room setup also played a role as classroom seating stifled exchange and moveable seating or small groups fostered discussion. Some organizers who had staged Family and Community Town Suppers (FACTS) adapted that framework to this event.¹³

As noted earlier, meeting organizers were provided with information to stimulate discussion. Most often, attendees, somber after viewing “This Place” and hearing from local leaders, were introspective. The alcohol industry refrain that “Underage drinking is an individual problem. It is the responsibility of parents to control their children”¹⁴ was occasionally aired, but failed to become the dominant theme anywhere.

In Osseo, the discussion was still going at the posted adjournment time. When the discussion continued until the meeting site was no longer available, a second meeting was set. Fifteen of the original attendees returned and a dozen new faces joined the second discussion which resulted in a new community group dedicated to reducing local underage alcohol use.

5. Frame the issue carefully to move from awareness to action

The goal of these meetings was to frame underage drinking as a two part issue.

- Underage drinking is a serious problem in our community.
- There are effective remedial steps that families and communities can take to reduce underage drinking.

Every meeting effectively communicated the first aspect of the issue. Several meetings simply could not make the transition from awareness to any type of action.

When two of the first three meetings had trouble making the transition from awareness to action, it became evident groups needed to plan how to make the transition. Organizers of later meetings were contacted and asked to plan how to navigate this passage. Later meetings often provided an aural or visual cue to help attendees transition to the second aspect of the message.

Some community organizers created special cues. In Hayward, organizers wrote two possible family policies on the agenda and asked attendees to demonstrate their commitment to those promises by standing.

Hayward Pledge

As a concerned community member I pledge:

- I will not allow people less than 21 years of age to drink alcohol in my home.
- I will tell everyone 21 years old and older in my family it is not OK to serve alcohol to minors.

KEEP TALKING WISCONSIN: AUTUMN 2006 TOWN HALL MEETINGS

The initial Town Hall Meetings demonstrated a base of community level concern about underage drinking in Wisconsin. With the support of the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services, the Wisconsin Clearinghouse for Prevention Resources provided stipends for a second series of Town Hall Meetings in autumn 2006. Technical assistance, missing from the federal initiative, was provided by the Wisconsin Clearinghouse, including Wisconsin-specific materials, services, and targeted support based on lessons learned from earlier events.

1. A series of conference calls, followed by a steady stream of support services, provided a peer group and technical support for organizers and key volunteers.
2. Technical assistance for media advocacy, advertising, and promotional material was available throughout the planning process.
3. Meetings were structured to move communities from awareness to action,⁵ channeling enthusiasm into proven policy options that reduce underage drinking.
4. Wisconsin-specific materials were developed in cooperation with those organizing upcoming meetings and reflected what earlier meetings learned about parental awareness.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE MATTERS: ORGANIZATION AND LOGISTICAL SUPPORT

Direct financial support for autumn meetings was similar to the level of support provided for earlier events, between \$850 and \$1,000. Community groups were recruited by Wisconsin's 12 Cooperative Service Education Agencies (CESA), part of Wisconsin's public education system and affiliated with the RADAR Network Center at the Wisconsin Clearinghouse for Prevention Resources.

Each CESA district was asked to solicit a single community to hold a Town Hall Meeting based on the following criteria:

- Ability of a community group or coalition to stage the event
- Community interest or readiness to confront the issue of underage drinking
- Knowledge of focusing events in the community that heightened public interest
- Existing leadership or the potential for leadership on this issue

Beginning in August, regular teleconferences permitted Wisconsin Clearinghouse staff to monitor local planning and support early media outreach. Organizer suggestions guided the development of the PowerPoint presentation provided to each meeting, template press releases, and opinion pieces. Each site received "This Place," the award winning 15 minute video illustrating the community alcohol environment and highlighting communities that have successfully changed the community approach to alcohol.

To support an assertive media advocacy program, organizers were given the opportunity to participate in a conference call with an experienced and successful media advocate, Nicole Holt of Texans Standing Tall Against Underage Drinking.

- Support police efforts to break up underage drinking parties and report parties with teens & alcohol to the police.

Communities can:

- Support police action to break up underage drinking parties and action against people who provide alcohol to youth.
- Support local law enforcement age compliance checks.
- Eliminate alcohol sponsorship at community events.
- Ban alcohol paraphernalia from K-12 school events.
- Limit alcohol in public parks.
- Ban or limit alcohol billboard placement to avoid locations near schools, parks and places of worship.
- Sanction places that repeatedly sell alcohol to minors.

4. Action Requires Courage

At meetings across the state people spoke about being "bold," "brave," or "hav[ing] the courage" to take on underage drinking. The similarity in wording throughout the state was striking. In context, attendees appeared to speak to the difficulty in challenging local norms which condone or ignore underage drinking. During one meeting participants agreed that it would take courage to report underage drinking and adults who allow underage drinking to authorities. In another meeting the organizer praised attendees for their courage saying "It took courage just to show up. Everyone has their own alcohol use, history and baggage."

Advocates and organizers may wish to acknowledge this point. Challenging community norms requires courage and given a hostile alcohol environment, civic courage may be as much a part of the civic infrastructure or community capacity as other factors.

Unlike many other states, Wisconsin communities control most aspects of alcohol licensure and enforcement. Many states have single agency control of alcohol licensure and in some states, a separate statewide alcohol police force. That concentration of authority makes Wisconsin's communities a powerful entity in the fight against underage drinking and empowers small groups to make significant changes within their communities.

3. Wisconsin Residents are Unaware of Effective Community Options

While some Wisconsin communities have adopted policies and practices which address community factors contributing to underage alcohol use, most prevention efforts focus on parental responses and responsibilities, leaving communities without a ready catalog of options. The Wisconsin Clearinghouse for Prevention Resources provided each meeting site with information on the following steps. Some communities adapted these steps to meet local concerns and norms.

Families can:

- Support family friendly alcohol-free community events, such as First Night.
- Know where your child is going and if parents will be present – then call to be sure.
- If you think your child is drinking --- they probably are. Address it now.
- Make it clear to all family members, especially older siblings, that providing alcohol to underage persons is both illegal and unacceptable.
- Secure your personal alcohol supply and ask other families to do the same when adults are not present.
- Limit your own alcohol use – the kids are watching.

This was especially important in small communities and rural areas. Wisconsin's rural broadcasters and newspapers retain their niche market by fostering very deep roots. Organizers willing to build relationships with the local media were rewarded with extensive local media coverage.

Organizers of the Onalaska meeting went a step further and recruited Anne Paape, news director of WKBT, Channel 8 La Crosse, to moderate their meeting. Her participation gave the event credibility, coverage and enabled organizers to give a key community contact a thorough understanding of local childhood drinking.

NEW LESSONS LEARNED

1. Wisconsin's Parents Reflect Industry Messages

The influence of the brewing industry on Wisconsin's past and present is clear. Wisconsin's adults mirror alcohol industry "responsibility" advertising in conversations about underage drinking. This should not surprise anyone. Each day the alcohol industry spends \$13 million on advertising and promotional efforts. The Beer Institute, the trade association for America's brewers, describes its mission as "developing sound public policy that focuses on community involvement and personal responsibility."⁶

Alcohol Industry 101, published by the American Medical Association describes one alcohol industry prevention goal:

"Supplant policy and regulatory enforcement strategies with solely education, information and consumer oriented strategies that are easy to do, ineffective and mislead participants into thinking that's all there is so nothing else can be done."⁷

Consumer materials offering suggestions for parents to use as conversation starters with their children about alcohol are

produced by Anheuser Bush, SAB Miller and Coors. These materials repeat the theme found in alcohol industry material – “drinking is an individual choice; problems derive from irresponsible individual drinkers.”⁸

“Let’s Talk,” a brochure produced by SAB Miller, lists the following under the headline “What Parents Should Do:”⁹

- *Be a positive role model*
- *Ask, Ask, Ask, Parents must ask teens the 5 Ws*
- *Stay involved. Part of interacting with teens*

“Family Talk,” a publication for parents from Anheuser Busch states:

“If you drink responsibly, your children will learn responsible drinking attitudes and practices more easily from your example.”¹⁰

This line of reasoning can be summarized as “Underage drinking is an individual problem. It is the responsibility of parents to control their children.”¹¹ Wisconsin’s parents absorbed this line of thinking to the point that they faithfully recited the message without linkage to the alcohol industry at meetings all over the state. The wide range of individuals reciting alcohol industry platitudes showed the public impact of “responsibility advertising” over 20 years.

Community advocates working to reduce underage drinking should understand both the history and power of these beliefs. The industry suggestions are not harmful, although parent child communication in a hostile alcohol environment is not as likely to be effective as communication in a community which places barriers to underage alcohol use. Without statewide polling it is impossible to ascertain with any certainty if these sentiments reflect general beliefs or reflect pockets of personal opinion.

2. Culture Matters: This is *Wisconsin*

The second common sentiment is summarized by a single phrase, “This is *Wisconsin*.” The phrase was offered as either indictment of the community or individual absolution from responsibility, depending on the speaker. Speakers referenced Wisconsin’s historic role in the brewing industry, the role of German and Scandinavian immigrants, and the presence of alcohol at all events and celebrations as either reasons for the current situation or evidence the situation could not be remedied.

At some meetings, attendees drew the same conclusion but noted recent cultural changes as evidence that change is possible, most often public attitudes on tobacco use. While Wisconsin’s dismal alcohol-related epidemiological data is not solely the result of local social, legal, and political structures, those systems may be viewed as impediments to change.

The comments raise questions about whether Wisconsin residents have an accurate perception of Wisconsin’s alcohol environment, a perception that discourages local action. Some participants erroneously believed Wisconsin stands alone in its legal treatment of youth and alcohol. Contrary to some perceptions, Wisconsin is not the only state that allows parents to provide alcohol to their children. A total of 30 states permit parent provision of alcohol within a wide range of circumstances.¹²

Thirty states, including Wisconsin, allow underage individuals to sell alcohol for off-premises consumption, again in a wide variety of circumstances. Some states require off-premises sellers to have reached only age 16. Further, given the relative importance of local government in Wisconsin alcohol law, community change is within local reach.