La Crosse Festival Project

Goal: The La Crosse Changing the Culture of Risky Drinking Behavior Coalition (Coalition) has successfully worked with health care providers, educators, law enforcement and local elected leaders to implement community policies which will improve the local alcohol environment. In 2010, the Coalition turned its attention to alcohol serving polices at the outdoor events and festivals in the area.

Policy: The Coalition targeted 12 evidence based policies which reduce alcohol misuse at large events and are readily observable to the volunteer survey teams. The policies selected are among those suggested by the University of Minnesota Alcohol Epidemiology Program for outdoor events. http://www.epi.umn.edu/alcohol/festivals/index.shtm

Method: Two-person teams used an assessment tool created by a local epidemiologist to score 22 local festivals over a five month period, with multiple visits to some events. Teams moved anonymously through the festival grounds using the assessment tool (insert link) to monitor implementation of the 12 targeted policies.

Each set of completed assessments, both the score sheet and handwritten notes, were reviewed by a single individual. The reviewer reconciled the observations for each event compiling the narrative comments and creating the numerical score. As needed, the reviewer reconciled the information to reflect variations in the notes or scoring. The variations are reflected in the final compilation. The final report included both a numerical score and comments on each festival. The aggregate results were made public while individual festival scores were given privately to the festival organizers.

Summary: After the final event in late autumn, the festival planners (usually volunteer committees or managers) were invited to a dinner meeting to receive their score and learn how improved alcohol serving policies could reduce alcohol misuse.

At the dinner Coalition members reviewed the 12 policies, shared the aggregate scores and then provided each festival with its individual score. Festival representatives were seated as groups with a coalition representative at each table. During dinner Coalition volunteers and festival officials discussed the results informally. Some festival organizers were willing to discuss and compared scores while other groups preferred to discuss their score privately.

Providing individual scores in a social setting created an atmosphere of trust and a collaborative spirit. Reviewing the aggregate scores with the larger group enabled individual festival organizers to put their individual festival score into perspective. The seating arrangement encouraged groups to begin internal discussions while the survey results were fresh in their minds.

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The aggregate results suggested most festival organizers were taking some steps to reduce underage alcohol use, including ID checks, wristbands and distinguishable cups, but few took steps to discourage over-serving or serving intoxicated patrons. While all festivals checked ID at least some of the time, festival policies to reduce alcohol over-consumption were far less likely to be implemented.

None of the surveyed festivals limited the number of beverages a single buyer could purchase in a single trip. Some festivals only sold canned or bottled beverages, as opposed to pitchers, which resulted in uniform portions.

Volunteer observers reported when intoxicated individuals continued to be served, which is an inherently subjective judgment. Observer notes suggested most sales to intoxicated individuals were borderline situations. Only one festival was free of alcohol advertising and sponsorship, making the refusal to accept alcohol advertising the policy least likely to be adopted.

After reviewing individual festival scores with Coalition volunteers, a general discussion of alcohol sale and serving policies took place. Attendees were encouraged to send servers to responsible beverage server training (TIPS training was offered several months later) and to provide alternative incentives to volunteer servers in lieu of free alcohol.

Next Steps: In 2011, the Coalition will resurvey participating festivals comparing the assessments to determine if additional policies were adopted reduce risky drinking often associated with festivals in Wisconsin.

Lessons Learned: The alcohol serving polices at area festivals varied widely, but all could reduce the likelihood of negative alcohol related consequences by improving their alcohol related policies and practices.

When festival organizers provided a private assessment instead of a public reprimand it opened a productive dialog focused on reducing alcohol related problems. The Coalition learned that most festival organizers were long term volunteers, not professional event managers and were very willing to take steps to prevent alcohol misuse if some technical assistance was available. The 2011 score will allow the Coalition to determine if festival planners were able to turn their good intentions into practice.