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is published periodically by CARS under its Community Prevention Institute contract with the California Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs (DADP). The purpose of this publication is to help practitioners in the prevention field stay abreast of best practices emerging from current research and to provide practical tools and resources for implementing proven strategies.

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POLICY PANELS:

Creating Effective Public Policy

Local policy panels are powerful tools to assist California communities in addressing alcohol and other drug-related problems, such as youth access to alcohol. Policy panels also serve to mobilize new community organizations and leadership in the service of progressive prevention strategies.



The basic idea behind a policy panel is probably as old as the formation of communities: 1) Assemble a group of citizen leaders; 2) give them a defined problem to address; 3) allow time to study the problem and seek input from grassroots community members and key influentials; and 4) ask them to recommend a solution(s). At other times, this process may have been called a "blue ribbon" commission, a community task

By John de Miranda

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Tactics (tak'tiks) n. **1.** a plan for promoting a desired end. **2.** the art of the possible.

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force, or a citizen's advisory group. Whatever its name, the process described here is distinguished by recruiting panel participants: 1) many of whom were not previously active in the alcohol and drug abuse prevention field, 2) who bring high levels of community prestige and influence to the effort, and 3) who have a significant stake in the issue being addressed as well as in the successful outcome of the panel's activities.

Characteristics of a Policy Panel

Often, a policy panel is instigated by a group of activists and human service professionals; initiators, who are interested in broadening the base of support and activity around an issue, such as youth access to alcohol. Policy panels differ from governmental advisory bodies in several important ways.

- **Policy panels are usually established as independent bodies. They derive their authority and credibility from "the community," not from any governmental agency.**
- **Policy panels adopt a perspective that acts on all sectors of the community. In both their structure and sphere of action, policy panels are cross-disciplinary and multi-system. We live in a "shared power world" in which no one agency, department, or institution can solve the social problems faced by our communities.**
- **Policy panels have a narrow, specific mandate. This "charge" may be to develop policy recommendations to limit underage access to alcohol, to increase racial harmony, or to curb community violence.**

As a new tool for communities, policy panels present a mechanism to increase social capital (Putnam 1993). Social capital theory provides a template for understanding how community coalitions, community organizing and other interventions (such as policy panels), act to improve the quality of life and reduce community problems. Smith (1994) defines social capital as, “the norms, networks, and relationships within a community characterized by cooperation and trust for mutual benefit and gain.” Simply put, social capital is the currency that enhances a community’s quality of life.

Realizing the Value of Policy Panels

The concept of public policy panels has become popular in recent years. This is due, in part, to the success and visibility of perhaps a dozen national policy panels convened by Join Together, a Boston-based national technical assistance initiative focusing on community coalitions and funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

The first Join Together policy panel report, **Save Lives: Recommendations to Reduce Underage Access to Alcohol & Action Steps for Your Community** (1995), stimulated a number of local panels in California that addressed the same subject. In the late 1990s, policy panels addressing youth access to alcohol occurred in San Diego, Santa Rosa, Lake County, Pasadena and Santa Cruz. Recommendations from this initiative focused on the following: conditional use permits for alcohol; educating retailers about their responsibility to not sell to minors; high school and college prevention programs; enforcement of youth alcohol

laws; advertising targeting youth; and alcohol free park and recreation areas.

The most recent Join Together policy panel, **Ending Discrimination Against People with Alcohol and Drug Problems**, was issued in 2003. Its recommendations include parity for addiction treatment and elimination of discriminatory penalties in housing, student loans, employment, and provision of disability benefits.

Challenges in Establishing Policy Panels

Instigators face several challenges when planning and creating a panel. Two of these challenges involve how to determine which individuals within the community should be invited to join the panel.

The first challenge addresses the question, “Who are the most important individuals in a given sector?” In answering this question, initiators should understand that developing a successful panel involves strategic alliances and political decisions that may be difficult and even uncomfortable to alcohol and other drug prevention and human service workers.



participation (see *Recipe for a Policy Panel-Timelines and Deliverables*). But often, by the end of the process, panelists wish to continue to ensure the adoption of their recommendations. Because panelists invest personal time, energy and sometimes, their organization’s resources, they often develop a strong vested interest in both the immediate deliverable (panel report) and the long-term changes envisioned by the final report.

For example, the San Diego County Policy Panel on Youth Access to Alcohol issued its report in October 1994. Ten years later, the

panel continues to be a significant institution in the San Diego County prevention system. This is just one example of how effective panels can have an impact on their community that extends far beyond their formal existence.

Putnam, Robert D. 1993. *Making democracy work: Civic traditions in modern Italy*. Princeton University Press.

Smith, Steven Rathgeb. 1994. *Social capital: Community coalitions and the role of institutions*.

Recipe for a Policy Panel

Identify a major community problem

Convene a steering committee or planning group*

Assess the feasibility of a policy panel:

who, what, when, where, why, how? Identify partners

Identify and recruit panelists*

Develop problem analysis and charge to the panel

Develop a plan with timelines and deliverables

Develop a media strategy

Kickoff*

Study session(s), background briefings*

Public hearings*

Deliberative sessions

Rollout to the community, create a dissemination plan*

Celebration*

Develop action plan for implementing recommendations

Six-month/one year anniversary*

*** Media Opportunity**

For example, in establishing the Santa Rosa panel on youth access to alcohol, initial discussions about the institutions that should be represented on the panel assumed that the wine industry would be excluded. Panel instigators shared stories of how wine industry interests were often opposed to past progressive prevention initiatives. One participant challenged this thinking, “How can we expect to have the support and credibility of the broader public if we automatically exclude one of the most significant economic sectors in the community?”

After the initial shock at the thought of working cooperatively with the wine industry passed, the instigators sought to identify a wine industry representative who would be sympathetic to the panel’s goals. An owner of a family winery was proposed, and she was invited to be a member of the panel as a representative of the Sonoma County Wineries Association. Rather than creating contention during the panel’s deliberations, her participation added considerable clout to the panel’s final recommendations, several of which dealt directly with the business practices of wineries and retail alcohol beverage outlets. In essence, the “adversary” had become a friend because of the policy panel’s importance to the whole community. This kind of recruitment of new supporters to the cause has been experienced repeatedly by policy panels throughout the state.

Another considerable challenge addresses the question, “Who will attract attention, visibility, and perhaps additional resources?” In answering this question, instigators will want to seek out panel members who bring high levels of prestige, influence, and visibility to the enterprise. Approaching and recruiting business leaders and key influentials may require new thinking and communications skills from the initiators. Because a policy panel seeks to change community norms

and practices, a broad cross-section of the community should be represented by a good mix of grassroots and key influentials. It is not necessary for the key influentials to be experts about the issues on which the panel is focused. Their education will come through the panel process itself.

Instigators of the San Diego panel on youth access to alcohol knew that the print news media was an important sector to have represented on the panel. One individual suggested inviting a sympathetic reporter from the county’s daily newspaper who had covered alcohol policy issues. But in keeping with the question above, another instigator suggested that the newspaper’s editor (who had become something of a national figure because of regular participation on *The McNeil-Lehrer News Hour*), would be a better choice. Although concern was expressed about the conservative orientation on the paper’s editorial page, the decision was made to invite the editor. Gerald Warren, editor of The San Diego Union Tribune agreed to participate and brought considerable prestige to the panel. An added benefit was that when the panel’s recommendations were released, the Tribune published a major article about the effort.

A third challenge facing instigators is that the panel’s success may depend on perceptions about its independence from vested interests and change-averse institutions in the community. In one community, members of the planning group were surprised and enthusiastic that the city council expressed interest in “sponsoring” the panel. “Instant credibility,” and “we finally got their attention” were initial reactions from some of the activist-instigators. Other members of the group raised concerns about a formal relationship with the city’s elected officials. “Opinion surveys regularly indicate that the public holds elected officials in low esteem.

Why should we hitch our prospects to government? We're independent," stated one activist. Another wondered if some of the panel's possible findings, such as mandated responsible beverage service, might be too controversial for the city council to support wholeheartedly.

Eventually, the group decided to invite the city council to send a member as the governmental representative on the panel. In this way, the council was affirmed as an important part of the community, but as only one sector among many. The "authority" of the panel was derived from the fact that it emerged as a spontaneous response of citizens to an important community problem.

The Impact of Policy

Whether implemented nationally or at a community level, policy change can have a major impact on alcohol and drug problems. For example, the change in drinking age that occurred in many states to create a uniform national drinking age of 21 saves thousands of lives each year. Researchers estimate that even small changes in the price of alcohol can significantly reduce the number of young people who have access to alcohol. Similarly, passing local zoning ordinances that eliminate sale of drug paraphernalia in stores frequented by young people can pay dividends in terms of reduced use of marijuana or "poppers."

Often, these kinds of policy initiatives do not require substantial new funding, but rather seek to change a community's norms or an institutional practice. Following are some examples from policy panel reports:

- Recommendations that Santa Rosa and Sonoma County adopt a uniform teen party ordinance with mandatory civil fines and cost-recovery provisions.

- The Policy Panel recommended a study of alcohol-related conditional use permit code enforcement procedures, with a particular focus on developing a standard set of criteria for inspections, whether routine or complaint-driven.
- Recommendations that the San Diego County Board of Supervisors and the 18 municipalities in San Diego County should ban public drinking at all parks and beaches in the county.

Policy panels are effective tools for mobilizing communities. Al Richard, the Chairperson of the Santa Cruz County Policy Panel on Youth Access, summarized their efforts as follows:

More than fifty leaders from public and private sectors came forward to help figure out how best to deal with the problem of underage access to alcohol. They worked the issues, collected advice and input, and ultimately produced twenty-six policy recommendations and action items. The remaining question is "What is the next step?" Who will assure that the twenty-six items defined in this report are effectively implemented? Obviously champions are needed to carry on the work of the proposed solutions and efforts are needed from a broad spectrum of community leaders.

Extending the Influence of Policy Panels

Most panels occur over a four- to six-month period. Initially, panel members are enthusiastic about participating in a time-limited function. The time commitment of panelists is limited to a series of discrete meetings that are arranged well in advance to assure good