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## Community

**“While many teens drink, underage alcohol use is not inevitable.** It will take everyone in the community to make change happen. All of us can help change attitudes about teen drinking and help replace environments that enable underage alcohol use with environments that discourage it. . . **Together, communities can support teen decisions NOT to drink.”**

*U.S. Surgeon General’s Call to Action, 2007*

A community working together can create a positive and healthy environment. When it comes to alcohol use, community members, regardless of their roles, can have a strong influence on the actions of others. Underage drinking and other problems associated with alcohol use can be minimized when a community works in partnership. First, however, it is important to understand the issues.

Alcohol use in the U.S. is tied closely with social values, attitudes, and norms.

Examples of norms that sanction underage drinking and encourage misuse of alcohol include:

- Acceptance of underage drinking as a “rite of passage”
- Use of alcohol as a social lubricant
- Overemphasis on alcohol as a means to celebrate
- Dependence on alcohol to deal with personal problems

Other norms can discourage underage drinking and encourage responsible use of alcohol:

- Seeing alcohol as part of a meal and not an end in itself
- Unacceptability of intoxication and aggressive and unruly behavior
- Availability of recreational opportunities as alternatives to alcohol use
- Clear expectations and standards for acceptable behavior

### Issues around underage drinking

Alcohol is the substance of choice for youth. More youth use alcohol than tobacco and all other illegal drugs. Underage drinking:

- Is against the law
- Is harmful to the growing body and [brain](#)
- Is major cause of death and injuries among young people
- Increases the chances of alcohol dependence later in life
- Affects judgment and decision-making
- Contributes to risky sexual behavior

### Learn more

For more facts and statistics about underage drinking in Washington State and the U.S., [click here](#).

### The role of the community in reducing underage drinking

The environment in which young people live, go to school, and participate in activities affects their choices about whether or not to drink. The adults in their families, their schools, their churches, and their social groups can all have an influence.



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The Surgeon General's Call to Action To Prevent and Reduce Underage Drinking – [A Guide to Action for Communities](#) provides information and recommendations.

Specific activities that can be implemented in communities include:

- Regular compliance checks – Work with liquor enforcement officers or local law enforcement to check stores, bars or restaurants for sales to underage youth.
- [Shoulder taps](#) – A program to discourage adults from purchasing alcohol for underage youth.
- Sticker shock campaign – The placing of stickers on alcohol at stores that warn about the penalties of furnishing alcohol to underage youth.
- Policy advocacy on topics like alcohol advertising, community events, etc.

### **Understanding Adult Misuse of Alcohol**

Your family, culture, religious affiliation, and social circles or environment are just some of the factors that affect how you view and use alcohol. While alcohol laws and policies can help moderate behavior, prevalent social beliefs and behaviors are a strong factor in how people use alcohol.

Expectations about the social benefits of alcohol are reinforced through advertising and other media. Movies and television depict alcohol use as a way to retreat from your sorrows, as a means for a good time, and as a tool for social success.

The societal costs of adult misuse of alcohol can be extensive. These may include:

- Health/medical costs due to injury or medical treatment for health-related consequences
- Legal costs
- Lost productivity, loss of job
- Premature death
- Family disintegration
- Homelessness
- Treatment costs

### **Encouraging responsible use of alcohol**

Changing community norms to encourage responsible use of alcohol and discourage misuse is a long-term, difficult task. However, ways to move toward these changes include:

- Establish “community values” statements to include responsible use of alcohol and expectations regarding alcohol use at community events
- Work with your local government to limit alcohol outlet density in your community
- Provide more opportunities for recreational activities that do not center on alcohol use
- Support the enforcement of laws pertaining to alcohol use
- Partner with local organizations and the media to promote responsible alcohol use

### **Working Together**

Community partnerships involving government agencies, law enforcement, schools, businesses, faith communities, service organizations, non-profit agencies, and citizens can have a positive impact. Many communities in Washington State already have coalitions addressing some of the issues described here. You can find more information about coalitions and activities in your area by going to [www.StartTalkingNow.org](http://www.StartTalkingNow.org).

If you or someone you know is struggling with substance use, call the Recovery Helpline at 1-866-789-1511.

