

# **Underage Drinking and Social Hosting in Hemingway, IL**

*A Case Study in Assessment and Policy Development  
Mid-America Regional Public Health Leadership Institute Year 17 Fellows*

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## **Introduction**

Underage drinking in America has become one of the most severe public health challenges facing our nation. Young people who participate in such activities put themselves at higher risk for violence, unplanned pregnancy, STDs/HIV, lower academic achievement, injury and even death. Combined with the misconception that underage drinking is a rite of passage for young people, the practice is reluctantly condoned by many parents concerned with providing a seemingly safe and controlled environment for teens to engage in these activities which could ultimately cost them their lives. Social hosting, as it is called, has become increasingly common among parents paralyzed by a sensed loss of control regarding the issue.

In the fall of 2006, Hemingway, Illinois began the arduous task of combating underage drinking and social hosting among residents in the community. Backed by hard data which outlined the severity of the problem, local health officials knew a strategy was needed to inform, educate and empower the people of Hemingway, to mobilize community partnerships that would stand united against underage drinking and social hosting, and to develop strong public policies designed to protect the health and safety of Hemingway residents.

In this case study we examine two core functions of public health (i.e. assessment and policy development) in the context of underage drinking and social hosting in a local community. As you consider the material presented herein, please decide if the actions taken to address the problems facing the community were appropriate. In your opinion, were all relevant actors invited to help develop a strategy? Determine if important steps were missed in the development and implementation of the strategy. And finally, outline and discuss the strengths and limitations of the strategy as it was put into action.

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## **Department/Agency History**

The Hemmingway Health Department was officially established in 1897. Its existence was birthed from the smallpox crisis of 1895. Local officials then mobilized to treat the community's smallpox victims in the most efficient and humane way. The incredible

surge and community activism initiated by the crisis led to the creation of the Hemmingway Health Department and today still highlights that seminal moment its history as the foundation of community service that they feel exists today.

### **Relevant Geographical and Demographic Information**

Hemmingway is located on the near west side of Chicago. Geographically, it is a small community (4.5 square miles); however it contains more than 50,000 residents. Hemmingway is one of the fastest growing communities in the nation. Starting from humble beginnings as a furniture-making community, Hemmingway today boast of consistent surplus city budget and a median household income of \$80,000. One of the most valued resources in the community is the diversity of its people, with nearly 50% of residents describing themselves as racial or ethnic minorities. Hemmingway also celebrates rich architecture and a beautiful, historic housing stock

The Hemmingway public school system, District 720, boasts some the highest test scores in the Midwest rivaling many area private schools. Hemmingway was listed as the fastest growing, most-desirable community to raise children by *Old Money* magazine. Affluent lifestyles are very status quo and families traditionally are very protective of their personal and family life.

### **Political Concerns**

Lawmakers of Hemmingway are mostly descendants of the city fathers and corporate magnets. Historically, they have been very successful in squeezing out any opposition from would-be politicians who want to make inroads into the Hemmingway community.

In the early 1900's Hemmingway was known for its bustling entertainment and night-life where the alcohol beverage industry grew and flourished. The alcoholic beverage remains one of the leading industries and influential political players in Hemmingway.

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## **Response To Survey Results**

### ***Community***

The underage substance abuse issue presented great concern and embarrassment (even denial) that such activities were happening in Hemmingway.

Eleanor Sugarglider, councilwoman representing the 7<sup>th</sup> district, was visibly shaken and embarrassed when addressing officials from Hemmingway High School and the Hemmingway Health Department. "We are a proud and prosperous community...obviously some negative influences from .... other parts of Chicago are infiltrating the lifestyles of our young citizens." Other officials, such as Peter Clueless, PTA president of Jefferson Elementary school dismiss the results of the 2006 SYAS as "minimal" and accused the community of being "alarmist and opportunistic."

It appeared that the clear solution to the problem was to eliminate social hosting parties. However, there remained the element of students continuing to drink without the pseudo

support of their parents. Taking responsibility for the behaviors took a paradigm shift from the perspective of each entity involved.

### ***Parents***

Parents were very defensive when invited to join in fighting the problems indicated by survey results. Deemed to be irresponsible by the teachers, administrators and public health officials, they built alliances with neighbors and friends in the community to fight for privacy and attempt to take the spotlight off the issue. Noting that this should be a family focused problem, the parents were uneager to participate in community outreach activities (described later in this document). Buy-in was slow from the majority of the parents.

### ***Students***

Students weren't eager to admit openly some of the behaviors they admitted to on the survey. Noting that they assumed the information would be confidential, they requested not to be personally questioned or asked to participate in a level of personal admission. This presented as an obstacle for administrators seeking to obtain answers to the problems. In addition, it presented an issue with parents taking responsibility for the actions of their children if the children weren't willing to admit to the problems.

### ***High School and Hemingway Health Department Officials***

Hemingway High School officials were also alarmed by the survey results. Paul Smith, Hemingway High School guidance counselor, stated in a meeting with health department officials, "Unfortunately, I am not surprised by this report; my caseload has increased by 35% since 2007. An increasing amount of students reported concerns with parents allowing students to host drinking parties, including offering to provide the alcohol"

Unfortunately, the initial exchange between the school and the health department was not positive. Health officials wondered why the school had failed to address the problem. School officials fired back saying that it was no longer their problem to solve since they notified the health department.

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## **Collaboration and Action**

It was clear: Action was needed, and first steps would include repairing/improving the relationship between the school district and the health department and then, most importantly, implementing an intervention before the community lost a young person to an alcohol-related death.

In a statement, Susan Leigh, Hemingway Health Department Director, expressed her belief that the power to address the serious issue was within the citizens of Hemingway; "There is great influence throughout our community – our mission at the health department is to provide the resources and technical support to insure the success of the community's great efforts. Mr. Smith echoed this sentiment. "I believe it is entirely possible to reverse this disturbing substance abuse trend among our youth and eventually

meet and/or exceed REACH 2010 targets to decrease alcohol and marijuana use in adolescents:

*Increase the age and proportion of adolescents who remain alcohol free*  
1997 baseline: 13.1.1  
2010 target: 16.1

*Increase the age and proportion of adolescents who remain drug free*  
1997 baseline: 13.7  
2010 target: 17.4

*(Source: Healthy People 2010 Volume II)*

Staff from both organizations worked together to list possible activities designed to increase awareness about the dangers of underage drinking and the legal ramifications of social hosting.

School teachers and administrators wanted to avoid isolating the youth and families and in the spirit of building relationships with the community, the health department wanted to reiterate its dedication to the health of all residents.

The Hemmingway High School Community Relations Director's goal was to get the necessary information needed to the community, while at the same time assuring that the community felt safe about the students and their actions at the school.

To prepare for any media attention, the High School Community Relations Director teamed with the Health Department to identify data for the issue and the facts of how it may have affected the school. She included only what was necessary to release at that time, leaving the remainder of the information available to those who actually attended the summit.

### ***Community Coalition and Hemingway Youth Council***

Devon Smith, the Hemingway Health Senior Health Promotions Manager and Ms. Leigh partnered with community member Marjorie Nesselbaum to create a Community Coalition and Hemingway Youth Council (HYC) specifically to address this issue.

The Community Coalition developed a social marketing campaign targeting other parents and discouraging them from social hosting. The Coalition also served to:

- Encourage individuals, families, organizations, communities and policy makers to engage in effective prevention practices and support policies that promote healthy lifestyles.
- Provide statewide leadership in promoting healthy, drug-free communities
- Reach out to other area parents to discuss their kids, strategies to keep children alcohol-free and how to engage other parents.

The HYC organized the first ever Youth Substance Summit, which offered separate teen (mandatory for all students in conjunction with the school day) and parent (weekday evening) programs. The Summit included:

- Survey results
- Social norms education: youth largely assumed that their peers were binge-drinking more frequently than reports indicated. Fighting these assumptions served as the theme of the student programming.
- Students and parents alike were educated of health risks associated with underage drinking, including: unplanned pregnancy, STDs, accidental death, impaired decision-making and poor school performance.
- Both groups were addressed by the founding executive director of MADD, who shared her graphic and emotional personal story of being severely injured in an accident with an underage drunk driver.
- Parents were briefed by a local judge about the legal ramifications of social hosting, supplying alcohol to minors and failing to stop underage drinking if they discovered it.

### ***Curriculum***

The High School Substance Abuse Counselor instituted voluntary training classes with incentives, like gift certificates and grab bag prizes. She was able to use funds from the STD prevention grant across the health education curriculum if she incorporated both topics in her workshops.

She also used the survey results as a way to engage students in discussion about their honest thoughts and ideas about what drinking does to their life. While some students appeared disinterested, several decided to join the school newly formed ‘Substance Free Teen Group’ (SFTG). In the group they focused on identifying and sharing healthy and safe activities for teens to participate in. In addition, this group helped participate in campaigns across the county to promote substance free lifestyles.

Hemingway High School also considered implementing AlcoholEdu for High School curriculum. This is a Web-based course that incorporates proven prevention techniques with essential science-based alcohol education. The course provides an interactive experience that:

- Changes attitudes
- Motivates behavior change
- Supports safer, healthier decisions

Tools used to do this are:

- Three surveys – all strictly confidential – measuring changes over time in alcohol-related attitudes and behaviors
- Interactive exercises - Reinforcing key concepts
- A graded final exam - motivating students to assimilate the material and measuring their knowledge gains
- A concluding segment - one month after the final exam, providing students with a summary of the concepts they have learned

- Custom pathways - based on each student's gender and reported drinking behaviors, increasing the relevance of the course
- Non-judgmental - personalized feedback, contextualizing decision-making strategies

In addition, the school implemented a new policy banning the presence of alcohol from any school sponsored/associated parent event.

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## **Conclusion**

Hemingway officials representing both the school and the health department were surprised to learn that the 2006 State Young Adult Survey (SYAS) indicated that rates of underage substance use/abuse (alcohol and marijuana in particular) in Hemingway were not just high, but higher than county, state, and national averages.

To make matters worse, survey results indicated that parents were largely responsible for providing both the alcohol and the venue for consumption. Also, students had indicated that their parents either wouldn't care about their alcohol consumption habits, or would never find out if they did care.

Hemmingway is an affluent suburb of Chicago known for its excellent school systems, historic architecture, and diverse population. Both Hemmingway community parents and the Hemmingway school district initially expressed defensiveness towards the idea of a substance abuse problem of this magnitude being present in their community.

It was clear that a strong working relationship between the Hemmingway Health Department, school district, parents, and students would be needed to promote change. A Community Coalition and Youth Substance Summit were created to foster a working relationship among the aforementioned parties. The results were clear and effective. The community education helped to raise the awareness to the extent of the underage drinking problem in Hemmingway. Through a participatory design, the coalition and youth summit were able to create a sense of ownership and responsibility for the parents and youth to acknowledge and address the issues. Subsequently, school officials enacted policy change to ban the presence of alcohol from any school sponsored/associated parent event. The school counselor also implemented a voluntary student training group to address issues of underage drinking and substance abuse. This group became known as the 'Substance Free Teen Group' and went on to participate in campaigns across the country to promote substance free lifestyles.

Through on-going Community Coalition meetings and annual Youth Substance Summit events, updated survey results will be analyzed and processed to determine efficacy of prevention efforts. Intervention approaches will be modified based on survey findings and data. There has been a sense of increased solidarity and collaboration between the Health Department, School District, and community residents that will serve as the bedrock for future activities.

## Appendix and References

Underage alcohol use is more likely to kill young people than all illegal drugs combined (2,3). Some of the most serious and widespread alcohol-related problems among adolescents are discussed below.

- **Drinking and Driving.** Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death among youth ages 15 to 20 (4). Adolescents already are at increased risk through their relative lack of driving experience (5), and drivers younger than 21 are more susceptible than older drivers to the alcohol-induced impairment of driving skills (1,5). The rate of fatal crashes among alcohol-involved drivers between 16 and 20 years old is more than twice the rate for alcohol-involved drivers 21 and older (6).
- **Suicide.** Alcohol use interacts with conditions such as depression and stress to contribute to suicide, the third leading cause of death among people between the ages of 14 and 25 (7, 8). In one study, 37 percent of eighth grade females who drank heavily reported attempting suicide, compared with 11 percent who did not drink (9).
- **Sexual Assault.** Sexual assault, including rape, occurs most commonly among women in late adolescence and early adulthood, usually within the context of a date (10). In one survey, approximately 10 percent of female high school students reported having been raped (2). Research suggests that alcohol use by the offender, the victim, or both, increases the likelihood of sexual assault by a male acquaintance (11).
- **High-Risk Sex.** Research has associated adolescent alcohol use with high-risk sex (for example, having multiple sexual partners and failing to use condoms). The consequences of high-risk sex also are common in this age group, particularly unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS (2). According to a recent study, the link between high-risk sex and drinking is affected by the quantity of alcohol consumed. The probability of sexual intercourse is increased by drinking amounts of alcohol sufficient to impair judgment, but decreased by drinking heavier amounts that result in feelings of nausea, passing out, or mental confusion (12).

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