

The Stillwater Community Deliberates Approaches on Alcohol Abuse

Report on Deliberative Forums Held March 30, 2006

Introduction

Each year, the Kettering Foundation, a nonpartisan research organization, through the National Issues Forum (NIF) Institute (www.nifi.org) prepares discussion guides on subjects important to people across the nation. *Alcohol: Controlling the Toxic Spill* was created for public deliberative forums on alcohol abuse. Statements from that guide and a fact sheet with Stillwater-specific data summarize the basic problem posed to deliberative forum participants in Stillwater:

Excessive drinking creates countless personal disasters, including job losses, bankruptcies, suicides, divorces, crimes, lost friendships and ruined family life. Nearly one-in-ten adults meet criteria for chronic alcohol abuse or alcohol addiction.

Further, many young people are experiencing the consequences of drinking too much, at too early an age. As a result, underage drinking is a leading public health problem in this country and specifically in Stillwater.

Using the NIF guide, approximately 50 people representing diverse segments of Stillwater gathered to deliberate three possible approaches to the alcohol issue in our community. Forum participants included youth (junior high and high school), young adults, representatives from religious groups, teachers, school administrators and counselors, university faculty and administrators, law enforcement personnel, people from the business sector, and individual service agencies as well as public officials. The following describes the deliberative work done that evening.

Deliberation of Three Approaches

Public deliberation is a means by which citizens make tough choices about the basic purpose and direction for their communities—a way of reasoning and talking together. In deliberative forums of 15-18 persons, forum participants carefully weighed the consequences and trade-offs of three broad policy directions. For each policy approach, participants were asked to identify appeals, concerns, consequences of adopting the policy in Stillwater, and the trade-offs that would result from a given policy direction. Below is a summary of their perspectives.

Approach 1: Demand citizen responsibility

This approach argues that, to deter alcohol abuse, the nation must draw the line on the irresponsible use of alcohol and provide swift, certain, and severe punishment to those who cross that line. Following is a summary of participants' perspectives on Approach 1.

Appeals:

- Swift, certain, and consistent punishment that holds individuals responsible is important
- Law enforcement depends on citizen involvement and community responsibility
- Stricter enforcement results in fewer violations
- Imposing legal responsibility and consequences causes some abusers to seek treatment

Concerns:

- Current laws are enough but they are not being consistently and fairly enforced so abuse continues
- Alcohol charges can harm young people and negatively impact their future
- Lack of community resources for strict enforcement
- Treatment is not addressed

Consequences of implementing Approach 1 in Stillwater:

- Will need to find more resources
- Personal freedom and privacy will be affected

Approach 2: Treat the public health epidemic

In this view, many more programs for prevention, early detection, counseling, and treatment are needed to address the range of alcohol problems leading up to and including addiction. Following is a summary of participants' perspective on Approach 2.

Appeals:

- More treatment would result in decreased crime and domestic abuse
- This approach is appropriate for those who are addicted—must recognize two separate populations: abusers and alcoholics
- Could change perception of community that alcoholism is a disease
- Dual diagnosis (mental health issues plus substance abuse) would result in better treatment
- Recovery is a continuous lifelong process—treatment must have follow-up

Concerns:

- Lack of affordable and accessible treatment results in incarceration as a method of protecting the public. In our community, treatment centers are inaccessible and not covered by insurance
- Alcoholism can be a chronic problem—across the lifespan—it should be recognized as such. Currently alcoholism is treated as an acute problem
- Some abusers do not want help or do not recognize the problem—they cannot be helped until they are ready
- Current treatment approaches are not effective for all—have high relapse rate

Consequences of implementing Approach 2 in Stillwater:

- How do we pay for increased and improved treatment?
- Acknowledging the linkages between alcohol abuse and mental illness
- Treatment must be before and after

Approach 3: Educate for societal change

Using the antismoking campaign as a model, this approach calls for society-wide education efforts to dispel falsehoods and ignorance about alcohol and, at the same time, generate popular social norms and public policies for responsible behavior. Following is a summary of participants' perspective on Approach 3.

Appeals:

- Helps individuals make better decisions and choices
- Emphasizes prevention
- More cost effective than enforcement or medical treatment
- Moves from myth to truth

- Most effective if educate parents as well as youth

Concerns:

- How to pay for this
- Current alcohol education is a joke to the kids
- Does not go far enough; enforcement and treatment still needed
- Education will not reach households with culture of drug and alcohol abuse
- Alcohol use and often abuse are seen as a “rite of passage” supported by parents
- Peers are more influential than education

Consequences of implementing Approach 3 in Stillwater:

- To implement this, Stillwater must be committed for the long haul because of resident turnover
- Education must be factual, up-to-date and targeted to different audiences—youth must be able to identify with the message—kids are not buying moral arguments against drinking
- Must use law enforcement to back-up education
- Such an educational effort will take time and financial resources—as a community we must find a way to pay for education

Reflections – Finding Common Ground for Action

After forum participants deliberated the three policy approaches, groups came together to identify common ground across all groups. *Common ground for action* occurs when participants gain a sense of what an individual and the citizenry can do to address the issue. Following is a summary of the common ground identified at the conclusion of the deliberative forum.

- To address the alcohol problem we must work together as a community—Stillwater is willing to start working toward addressing the alcohol problem facing our community
- Education is essential however it must be consistent and relevant—including multiple methods and approaches
- Education must start in the home and be consistently reinforced in the home
- As a community we need to determine what is acceptable and behave accordingly. For example “OSU Tailgating”
- Law enforcement is important but cannot do it alone—supporting law enforcement is the responsibility of all members of the community

Post Forum Survey

Forum participants were asked to complete a post-forum survey about the issue, and provided the following responses:

1. Here is a list of principles on which policies on controlling alcohol abuse might be based. How important do you think each one is?

	Very	Somewhat	Not at all	Not sure
a. We should hold people responsible for the harm they cause when they drink.	36	5	0	0
b. We should treat alcohol abuse as a health problem rather than a crime.	21	17	3	2
c. Society must stop accepting, and even glamorizing, irresponsible drinking.	28	10	1	
d. Programs that prevent alcohol abuse and treat alcoholism are much cheaper and more effective than prisons.	29	11	0	2
e. Education about the dangers of alcohol must start in the popular media.	27	11	3	
f. We need to make and enforce stronger laws to control alcohol abuse.	21	13	7	1

2. Look at the list in Question #1 again. How strongly is each principle actually reflected in our current policies?

	Strongly	Somewhat strongly	Not at all	Not sure
a. We should hold people responsible for the harm they cause when they drink.	18	18	4	1
b. We should treat alcohol abuse as a health problem rather than a crime	10	16	10	6
c. Society must stop accepting, and even glamorizing, irresponsible drinking.	11	12	15	1
d. Programs that prevent alcohol abuse and treat alcoholism are much cheaper and more effective than prisons.	6	11	10	7
e. Education about the dangers of alcohol must start in the popular media.	10	11	15	5
f. We need to make and enforce stronger laws to control alcohol abuse.	8	21	10	2

3. Are there any other principles that you think should guide public policy about controlling alcohol abuse? Please explain.

- Parental involvement – too busy, too tired
- Peer-pressure drinking should be monitored more
- Kids should be shown the consequences of their actions beforehand; most cannot grasp what would actually happen, that they could really get in trouble
- Real Christian influence
- Primary prevention is very important
- Keep MENTAL HEALTH in mind

4. How concerned are you about the issues listed below?

	Very concerned	Somewhat concerned	Not at all concerned	Not sure
a. Laws against drunk driving are too lax.	17	13	7	1
b. There are too few alcohol treatment programs for people who need them.	32	4	1	1
c. TV and movies reflect a society where excess drinking is cool.	26	8	4	
d. Many people are unclear as to when drinking becomes risky.	23	11	2	1
e. Unless prisons provide treatment programs, jailed alcoholics are likely to commit more crimes when they come out.	29	8	0	1
f. Existing alcohol control laws often lack adequate enforcement.	20	12	5	1

5. Do you have any other concerns about policy concerning alcohol abuse? Please explain.

- Drinking is a choice problem; people need to make the choice not to drink
- Parental influence is key
- It is critical to get support and help for those who do suffer from it as a disease
- Look at mental health too

6. How do you feel about these approaches to making policy about the control of alcohol abuse?

	Favor	Oppose	Not sure
a. Lower the legal blood alcohol limit for drunk driving EVEN IF this might make criminals out of ordinary Americans who are not a danger to society.	15	14	6
b. Alcoholism and alcohol abuse should be treated as health problems, not crimes, EVEN IF that gives many people an excuse for antisocial behavior.	20	12	5
c. Prevent alcohol abuse through major education programs EVEN IF this will not help millions of people who are already addicts.	28	4	4

7. Which statement best describes how you feel? (Please mark only one answer.)

a. I am not at all certain what our public policy should be with regard to controlling alcohol abuse.	10
b. I have a general sense of what our public policy should be.	16
c. I have a definite opinion of what our public policy should be.	16

8. Are there any other comments you would like to make about U.S. policy on this issue? Please explain.

- Community involvement is very important
- Treatment centers are needed

Deliberative Forum Hosts

- Mayor's Wellness Committee
- Seretean Wellness Center
- Oklahoma Partnership for Public Deliberation / Stillwater SPEAKS: *In Search of Common Ground*
 - Deliberative Forum Moderator/Recorder Teams: Sue Tate and Pam Haines; Steve Haseley and Holly Hartman; Dee Porter and Earl Johnson
 - Listeners: Sherril York, Jim Ryan, and Dean Hargrove
 - Report Preparation: Sue Williams and Renée Daugherty
- PaNok Area Prevention Resource Center