

Establishing An Alcohol Impact Area in Tacoma, Washington

BACKGROUND

Throughout much of the 1990s, Tacoma's Hilltop and Wright Park areas were plagued by public inebriation. The problem was widespread enough to draw the attention of King County (Seattle) Executive Ron Sims, who convened the Chronic Public Inebriate Solutions Committee (CPI Committee) in 1996. The statewide Committee comprised of representatives from treatment, housing, and employment, in addition to law enforcement and city administration, hoped to create a comprehensive strategy that would provide practical solutions to this persistent problem.

Thanks to his long-standing assignment, Tacoma Police Officer Greg Hopkins had recognized the severity of public inebriation in Hilltop/Wright Park/Stadium/Downtown areas, and had already begun exploring local solutions with his commanding officers. When the Committee looked to add a member of the Tacoma PD to its ranks, Hopkins was offered the seat.

The Committee made a significant breakthrough just two years later. In 1998, after holding a public hearing, the King County Board of Health (Board) declared chronic public inebriety to be a public health problem, not just a public safety concern. The Board requested that the Washington State Liquor Control Board (WSLCB) enact rules to reduce the availability of certain products in alcohol impact zones.

The Board's declaration helped convince the state lawmakers to take action on this issue. Under Washington State Law, the WSLCB has the authority to amend regulations governing its activity. Working with Committee members, the WSLCB rewrote the state's administrative code to grant municipalities the authority to implement mandatory controls on local alcohol sales.

The Washington State Legislature approved the change. The statute also laid out specific procedures for this process. A local governing body must attempt a voluntary liquor sales restriction for at least six months. If the voluntary action fails to achieve the desired goals, members of the proposed area could petition the city council to enact a legal limitation and forcibly limit liquor sales through the creation of an Alcohol Impact Area (AIA).

The Hilltop and Wright Park neighborhoods were able to quickly capitalize on this administrative code change. Hopkins had become very familiar with these neighborhoods as a member of the Drug House Enforcement Task Force (DHETF), a coalition of community members and city agencies. (The work of the DHETF is provided in greater detail in the 2002 MetLife Foundation Awards Case Book available at www.lisc.org/csi.) The DHETF reduced violent crime in the target area and provided a forum and focus for Hopkins to develop an extensive network of community partners. The work of the CPI Solutions Committee had brought greater attention to the harmful effects of public intoxication and revealed a possible local response.

RESPONSE

While the CPI Solutions Committee was solidifying the AIA process, Hopkins recognized an opportunity taking shape. He convinced the local associations to prioritize the reduction of public

intoxication in anticipation of the new regulations. Hopkins updated local groups about the CPI Solutions Committee's progress, and when the administrative code reforms went through in 1999, the community was not only well organized but familiar with the steps needed for gaining designation under the new law.

Hopkins worked with neighborhood associations, business district members, organized resident groups, and service providers to establish geographic boundaries and a list of restricted products. In February of 2001, the Tacoma City Council passed an ordinance defining the AIA within the Urban Core Area of Tacoma by a 9-0 vote. A large turnout of citizens and business owners came out in support of the AIA.

After the ordinance was adopted, Hopkins and Neighborhood Council Chair Russ Winter immediately began to contact licensed retailers to negotiate Good Neighborhood Agreements (GNA) for voluntary removal of specific types of wine and beer that contributed to the problem. Pierce County Executive John Ladenburg asked county staff not to do business with stores that would not voluntarily participate.

The Tacoma Police Chief endorsed Hopkins' strategy and encouraged voluntary participation. Concerned citizens picketed in front of those stores that had not signed a GNA. A store owner testified to others that he experienced an increase in business with area professionals after eliminating the listed products. Unfortunately the high-level endorsements and pressure were not enough to secure total compliance by local merchants. Only 50% of the vendors agreed to the voluntary ban. Without complete participation, the efforts of the participating vendors were undermined as the restricted products were still widely available. After the six-month trial period, Hopkins reported that a lack of total compliance had rendered this approach ineffective and that a mandatory ban was the logical next step.

RESULTS

As the communities took the final steps towards mandatory restrictions, Hopkins' tireless organizing and outreach proved critical to earning designation. Hopkins negotiated a hearing date in front of the city council and WSLCB to gain their approval.

The community's success would make it the first example of self-imposed restriction in the state. Despite an aggressive fight by the well-financed alcohol industry, over 250 people showed up to support the creation of the AIA on the day of the hearing. People brought in bags of empty containers collected from the streets. Resident groups, merchants' associations, the Tacoma PD, Tacoma Fire Department, local youth, and health care providers were all represented as the community testified for over an hour.

Ultimately, the community's chorus of voices overcame all opposing arguments, and the state's first AIA was established. Two years after the ban went into effect, the WSLCB commissioned an assessment of the AIA's impact. The independent study completed by Dr. John Tarnai of Washington State University found that the restriction was having a significant impact as measured by numerous criteria. Some of the findings include:

- 21% decrease in Detox Admissions (vs. 10% outside AIA)
- 61% decrease in Liquor in the Park police service calls (vs. 19% in similar calls outside AIA)
- 25% of residents and 21% of retailers report that problems with public inebriation have decreased over the previous two years (vs. 7% of residents outside AIA)
- 19% of residents report less incidents of public urination and defecation (vs. 8% of people outside the AIA)
- 31% of residents and retailers report less trash due to public inebriation over the past two years (vs. 10% of people outside the AIA)
- 25% of residents report that neighborhood is safer as compared with two years ago

As in North Little Rock, the success in Tacoma has lit a political fire under the local partners. Members are trying to establish ordinances regarding sales of drug paraphernalia and weapons in the target area. Others are writing letters to the editors of local periodicals discouraging city cuts in the police budget. Hopkins reports that many involved in the AIA effort now believe they can affect change in their own community.

LESSONS LEARNED

Research matters. Whether compiling crime statistics, investigating ownership status of problem properties, or researching relevant statutes, gathering accurate and thorough data and background information helps identify the real or underlying community problems. It also adds credibility to a grassroots effort in the eyes of those controlling resource allocation. Organizers can use their findings to complement anecdotal evidence in developing a strategic response.

Organizing is more effective when it is done in support of a particular goal rather than only in opposition to an existing condition. While anger and frustration motivate temporary involvement, the coalition which forms around specific objectives is more likely to maintain enthusiasm and realize its stated goals. Police officers are problem oriented, and their presence can help keep a partnership focused on real change.

Action is important. Including a wide range of collaborators in the problem solving process is critical to identifying a mutually advantageous solution and generating necessary political support, but eventually, the organizer must have the confidence to communicate a vision and lead the partnership towards its objectives. The organizer cannot allow details and uncertainty to prevent forward progress. Police officers, with their action-oriented instincts, seem particularly well-suited to meet this condition.

An organizing effort that employs both incentive (carrot) and potential punishment (stick) in its outreach strategy is likely to encourage greater participation.

Local change does not occur in a vacuum.

Neighborhoods compete for and rely on city, state, and national resources. Developing linkages to and an understanding of trends at these other tiers can help communities expedite the revitalization process by providing direction and capitalizing on broader momentum. The central participation of law enforcement in developing community-based responses offers an effective means to establishing those linkages and gaining that broader perspective.