

## Youth-Led Merchant Education Strategies

by Belinda Basca



### CASE STUDY

*It's Working*, a program of the Solano Substance Abuse Division strives to delay the onset of youth ATOD use and reduce access to and problems resulting from tobacco, alcohol and marijuana use.

The *SDFSC Case Study Series* is intended to provide a snapshot of the programs implemented and lessons learned by SDFSC grantees as a service to other grantees and alcohol and drug prevention providers.

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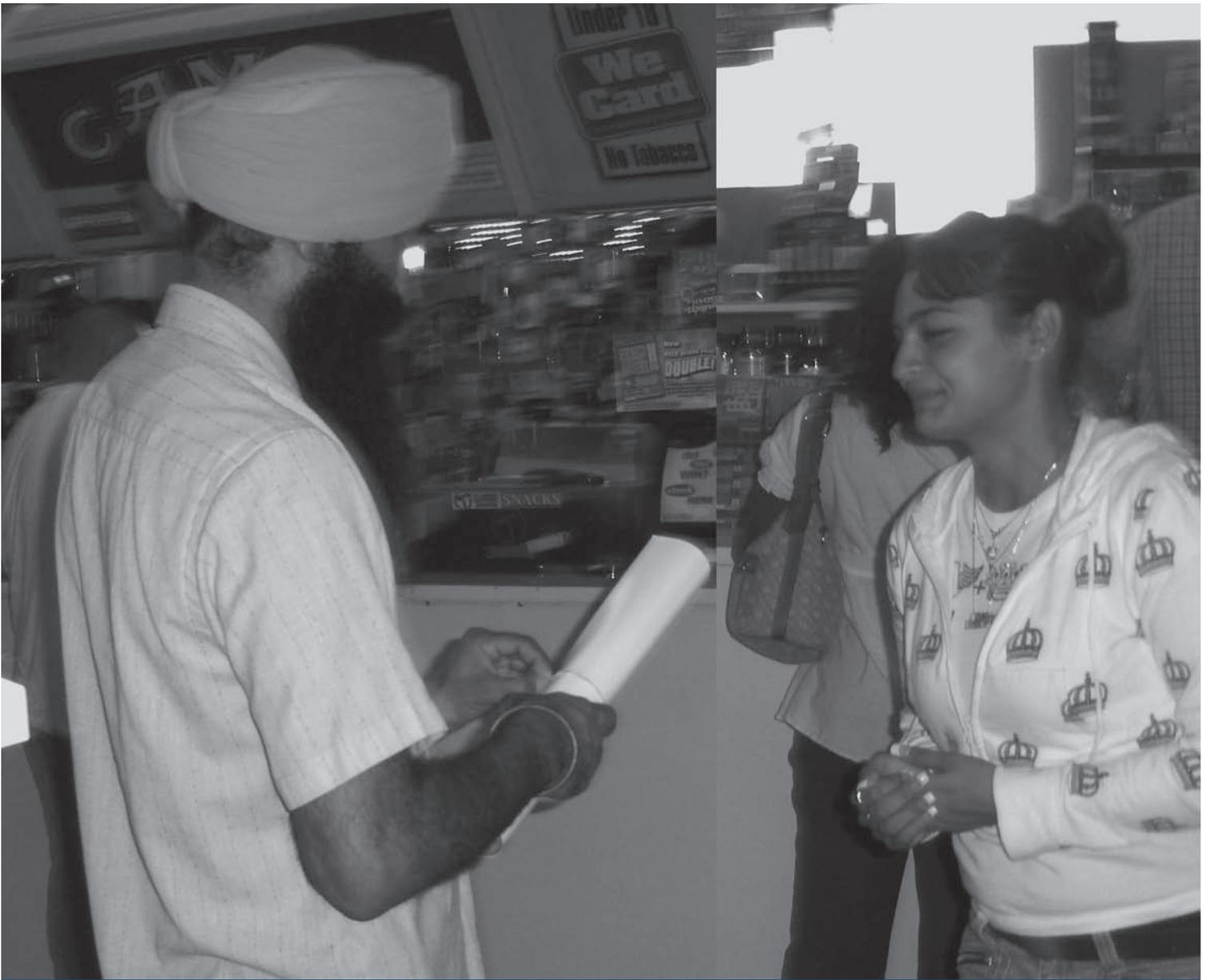
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by Belinda Basca, Ed. M.

## INTRODUCTION

It is against the law in all 50 States and the District of Columbia for people under 21 years old to buy or publicly possess alcohol. Despite the fact that it is illegal, underage drinking is prevalent and starts early. The average age when youth first try alcohol is 11 years old for boys and 13 years old for girls. Some children start drinking at even younger ages. By the time they are high school seniors, more than 80 percent of all teens have used alcohol at some point and approximately 64 percent have been drunk (Underage Drinking Prevention Action Guide and Planner, 2001).

## WHAT ARE MERCHANT EDUCATION PROGRAMS?

Education and training of merchants and servers who sell alcohol are intended to promote voluntary compliance with laws and regulations governing the sale of alcohol to minors. Education programs can be provided both for off-sales outlets (such as liquor or grocery stores) and on-sales outlets (such as bars and restaurants). These programs may also be conducted as part of a more general approach to responsible beverage service training. Educational approaches can take a variety of forms, including (PIRE, 1999):

- Distribution of materials to alcohol retailers summarizing the laws and penalties regarding sales to minors;
  - Training programs offered to managers and employees; and
  - Mandatory education programs for establishments or employees in violation of youth access laws.
- Merchant education can serve a variety of purposes, including:
- Provide information about laws and penalties that might help merchants to understand the risks they take when they sell to minors;
  - Persuade merchants that selling to minors is dangerous and violates not just the law but the norms of the community;
  - Help owners and managers establish responsible management policies; and
  - Teach skills—such as how to recognize a false ID—that can help prevent sales to minors.

## RESPONSIBLE BEVERAGE SERVICE (RBS) PROGRAMS

Responsible beverage service is one type of merchant education program, generally implemented in bars, restaurants, and other on-sales alcohol outlets. These programs inform participants about state and local ordinances concerning alcohol sales to minors, and about penalties for breaking these laws. Further, they help owners and managers to develop establishment-level policies and practices to help employees carry out their legal obligations.

Good training programs (Johnson, 2004) offer skill-development exercises, such as:

- how to identify a fake ID, how to confiscate it, and what to do with it once confiscated;
- how to determine whether an adult is buying alcohol for someone underage, and how to refuse service
- how to resist pressure to serve or sell alcohol to an underage customer; and
- how to refuse service without creating a tense situation.

## THE EFFECTIVENESS OF MERCHANT EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Merchant education alone has not been shown to be a powerful intervention to limit youth access to alcohol. Instead, merchant education should be conducted as part of a comprehensive and integrated enforcement effort. Enforcement of laws against sales to minors, such as compliance checks or shoulder tap decoys, is the key to reducing

underage sales. Well-publicized, vigorous use of compliance checks has been repeatedly shown to reduce sales to minors. Merchant education programs can support these efforts by helping to generate public and business support for enforcement and can enhance enforcement efforts

## YOUTH-LED MERCHANT EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Educating alcohol merchants can be a community effort that goes beyond any specific training program or distribution of materials. Some community groups visit merchants and talk to them about the importance of avoiding the sale of alcohol to minors. Sometimes youth make these visits themselves, asking merchants to help protect them and their peers. Youth have also led efforts to reward merchants who refuse to sell alcohol to minors with small prizes or by sending and publishing letters of commendation. Often the community support

that a merchant feels increases their efforts to do the right thing when it comes to limiting access of alcohol to minors.

Several SDFSC programs have begun to think about strategies to limit youth access to alcohol in their counties. One strategy for this is through youth-led merchant education strategies. Solano County is working collaboratively with the Fighting Back Partnership through the It's Working program to limit youth access to alcohol in Solano County. Their work is the subject of this case study.



## PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

*It's Working* of the Solano County Substance Abuse Division strives to delay the onset of youth ATOD use and reduce access to and problems resulting from tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana use.

*It's Working* has four prevention strategies that serve youth and parents in the Vallejo School District: the Botvin's Life Skills Training program, the Families and Schools Together (FAST) program, Student Assistance Services (SAS), and a Youth-Led Environmental Prevention Program.

Approximately 25 youth in Vallejo are actively involved with the Fighting Back Partnership in the youth-led environmental prevention program, known as the Youth Partnership. The goal of the Youth Partnership is to limit youth access to alcohol available at commercial settings. Specific components of the program include:



### **POLICE DECOY OPERATIONS**

As research has shown, enforcement is a key component in reducing alcohol sales to minors. Enforcement is crucial to Vallejo's underage drinking strategy; without it, community perceptions emerge that there is no risk of punishment in selling alcohol and tobacco to minors. Youth volunteers (over the age of 17 for alcohol and under 17 for tobacco) work undercover helping Vallejo police officers to conduct alcohol and tobacco stings at various outlets that illegally sell to minors including shoulder taps.

### **YOUTH SAFE ZONES**

Youth Partnership teens also conduct assessments of outlets' layout and advertising practices and encourage operators to create "youth safe zones" within their stores. By having young people meet directly with store owners and managers of convenience stores and liquor outlets, youth are involved in studying and reporting ATOD marketing and policy abuses.



## OUTREACH AND EDUCATION

Youth make presentations to businesses and organizations trying to discourage alcohol promotion and advertising. By having youth present their concerns about ads and prizes that promote alcohol and tobacco, they outreach to the community while developing important public speaking and leadership skills concurrently.

Participation of 25 youth during 2006 in the Youth Partnership was associated with a variety of positive impacts:

- 28 teams (14 tobacco and 14 alcohol) worked with the Vallejo Police Department (VPD). Youth attempted to purchase alcohol and/or tobacco 249 times (118 for alcohol and 131 for tobacco) resulting in 8 outlets selling alcohol and 4 selling tobacco to minors. The Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC) was then notified of these violations.
- Thirteen teens from the Youth Partnership attended 8 sessions with Toastmasters International to learn skills in Public Speaking. This empowered them to speak with authority to business owners. Presentations by youth generated changes in the floor plans of seven stores.
- Youth Partnership members distributed over 2,000 calendars for the 2007 year to local area schools, governmental agencies, nonprofit agencies, and businesses. The calendar theme was "What Does a Drug-Free World Look Like." Students submitted close to 200 illustrations for the calendar and Youth Partnership members selected the top 12 (four from elementary schools, four from middle schools, and four from high schools). Local area alcohol merchants were also given calendars to display in their establishments.
- Youth Partnership members have provided training in merchant education strategies to youth in other counties by sharing their experiences and role-playing decoy operations.

## BEST PRACTICES AND STRATEGIES

There are several key strategies that *It's Working* has utilized as they strive to provide youth-led merchant education strategies.

### 1. FOCUS ON STRATEGIES THAT ACTIVELY ENGAGE YOUTH

It is important for youth to feel a sense of purpose in the activities they are engaged in. They need to have active roles to bring about community change. With youth-led merchant education, this can take several forms.

In the City of Vallejo, Youth Partnership members provided merchants with an assessment of their window advertisements. California law allows up to 33% of the window coverage to be advertisements. However, the City of Vallejo ordinance only allows 15% of the window coverage to be advertisements. This is actively enforced in Vallejo by youth, community members (often called the “window warriors”), and the Vallejo Police Department.

During an assessment of a store visit, four youth, along with George Vásquez from the Fighting Back Partnership, provide merchant education to retail alcohol merchants. Two youth observe the exterior of the store and track compliance with advertising laws. Using a measuring tape, they calculate the percentage of window coverage, and then complete a report.

Meanwhile, two youth observe the interior of the store for alcohol products and placement in the store such as checking to see if alcohol products and soft drinks are in the same coolers. They also check that alcohol and/or tobacco advertising is not at the eye level of children. The youth interact directly with merchants pointing out any problems they have observed and then complete written report forms.

Later, George Vásquez returns to the store with law enforcement to check store compliance. Many times they have found that the owners want the youth to come back to see the changes they have made.

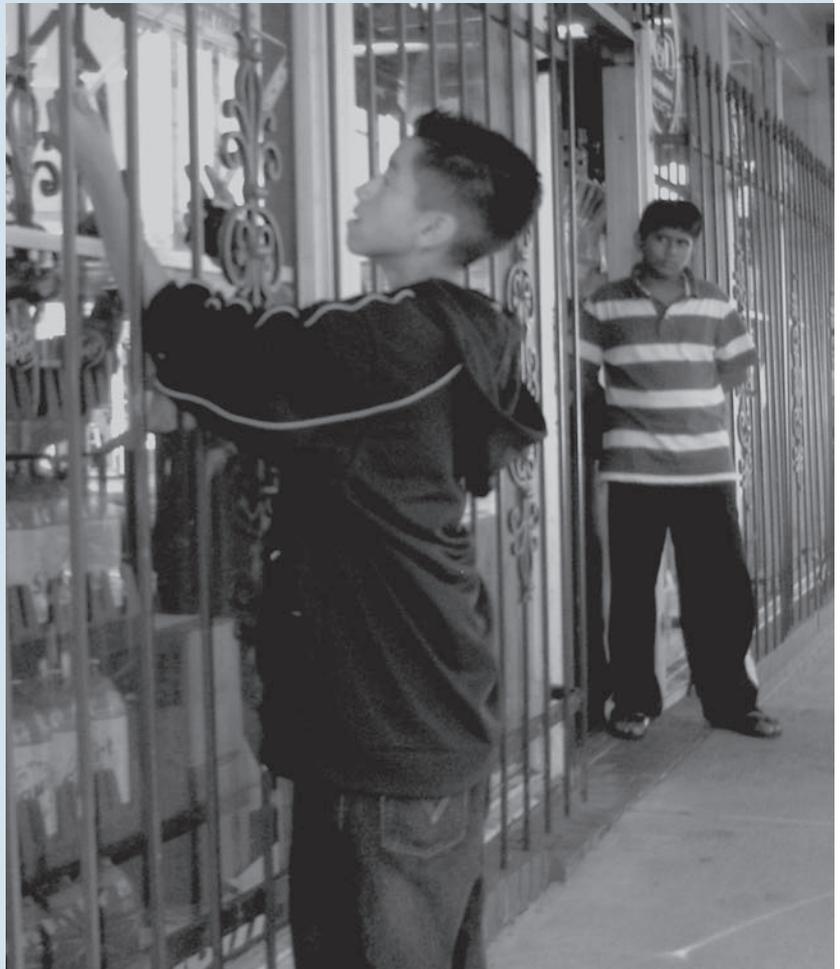
In addition, youth have played a role in promoting responsible beverage service (RBS) throughout Vallejo. Youth Partnership members enforce RBS by talking to business owners about their responsibility to not serve alcohol to minors.

### 2. ENGAGE THE ENTIRE COMMUNITY IN YOUR EFFORTS

Limiting youth access to alcohol is a community effort. The Youth Partnership has strived to diversify its strategies to educate not only merchants, but the community as well. Some strategies they have implemented that have engaged the community as a whole include:

- A Town Hall Peer-to-Peer Meeting on Alcopops in which Youth Partnership members presented information on Alcopops to community members, but specifically to youth from Vallejo.
- A Training the Trainer of Youth for the Dixon May Fair where Youth Partnership members trained Dixon youth on how to conduct assessments of merchants. And then the Dixon youth implemented the assessments themselves.

- An annual Calendar Contest involving youth from elementary to high school with the resulting calendar reaching the community as a whole.
- Educational outreach at community fairs such as the Vallejo Inter-Tribal Council's Annual Pow Wow in which youth handed out fliers about substance abuse prevention and manned a table responding to community members questions.
- At the Solano County's annual Juneteenth Celebration among the African American community, youth hosted an auction every half hour for community members. Members had to accurately respond to questions from the youths' substance abuse literature they were distributing with their community education resources. Fantasy Football kits were awarded to community members for correct responses.
- The Vallejo City Council formed the Front Porch Initiative to figure out strategies to improve quality of life for Vallejo communities. The Council decided to hold a series of town hall meetings to elicit ideas and concerns from the community. One meeting was specifically targeted towards youth. Youth Partnership members actively participated in the meeting as facilitators and also expressed to the community their ideas about how to bring about community change in Vallejo.
- Youth Partnership members participated in an FNL-funded project on teen binge drinking. Seven Youth Partnership members were interviewed regarding teen binge drinking, and they will be included in a video that is being produced on the topic and distributed the community at large.



### 3. PUBLICIZE YOUR EFFORTS

To create environmental change, it is important that youth publicize their efforts. Media advocacy is the strategic use of media to gain public and policymaker support for policy goals and changing community norms. There are several ways to use media advocacy strategies to support program goals. The media can bring public attention to the problems created by intoxication and underage drinking. Media advocacy can set the public agenda and advance policy-based solutions. Media advocacy frames issues to emphasize that problems are a shared community responsibility, and as such are amenable to change. In terms of merchant education, it is important to publicize the efforts merchants are taking to enforce their practices. Often communities provide merchant awards to stores that enforce local alcohol policies. This type of media ensures that the alcohol merchant is in good standing with the community, and is making every effort possible to limit access of alcohol to minors (Hoover, 2005).

Youth Partnership members develop and improve their public awareness and public speaking skills from participating in meetings with decision makers and sharing their efforts. They also develop self-sufficiency and leadership skills through weekly meetings, establishing goals and activities amongst themselves.

As a result, Youth Partnership members report back their efforts to get alcohol merchant compliance with window advertising to both the alcohol merchants themselves and the larger community. Through presentations to businesses and organizations, they publicize their efforts to discourage alcohol promotion and advertising. For example, the youth have presented to the Solano County Fair Board expressing their concern about ads and prizes that promote alcohol and tobacco. They have also engaged the entire Vallejo School District in an art/poster contest with different alcohol, tobacco, or other drug-related themes each year. Winning posters are printed into a calendar, which is made widely available to government, institutions, and residents of Vallejo.



## TIPS FOR REPLICATING SUCCESS

Solano County also shared with us some tips on replicating success for other SDFSC programs who are trying to implement youth-led merchant education strategies in their counties.

### **FOCUS ON STRATEGIES THAT ACTIVELY ENGAGES YOUTH**

- Encourage youth to have leadership and ownership of their meetings. Adults should provide guidance while empowering youth. Additionally, adults can meet later with the youth coordinator to discuss issues covered at the meeting.
- Select one or two youth to become leaders for the group.
- Provide stipends for the leaders.
- Provide trainings to youth on topics such as Alcohol Policy, responsible beverage service (RBS), and environmental prevention strategies to prevention to increase their knowledge on these topics.
- Encourage youth to attend community meetings with adult community members.
- Entrust youth to write their own reports and make presentations to adults at their meetings.
- Ensure that youth have fun in whatever activities regarding ATOD they engage in.

### **ENGAGE THE ENTIRE COMMUNITY IN YOUR EFFORTS**

- Give leadership opportunities to youth as they manage community activities such as coordinating and implementing a Town Hall meeting
- Involve youth in community activities that improve the quality of life in their local neighborhoods, such as volunteering in local area clean-ups
- Invite youth to make presentations regarding their activities at neighborhood meetings and block watches
- Coordinate youth and adult activities, similar to what the It's Working Program is doing with its FAST program (in which parents and youth are working collaboratively in neighborhood revitalization efforts) and the Window Warriors (in which community members are working with youth to ensure that merchants are in compliance regarding alcohol and tobacco window advertisements)
- Provide RBS training for community members and have youth talk to the community about the importance of RBS

## PUBLICIZE YOUR EFFORTS

- Build relationships with reporters and other media people (including the local TV channel) to showcase the youth's activities
- Encourage youth to report out what they are doing at community meetings
- Make youth reports on window coverage compliance accessible to the local law enforcement agency when they are doing assessments of local area merchants
- Team-up youth and law enforcement in enforcement activities
- Coordinate media participation when doing decoy activities
- Take lots of pictures of youth activities and have them ready to share with the media

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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