

When I tell someone I work for a community-based coalition working to prevent and reduce underage substance abuse, they often still don't understand what it is that a coalition does. How are we preventing and reducing? They want to see real change. Right now. (Yesterday would be even better.)

But if I say I'm a community organizer working to improve our neighborhoods and families around substance abuse problems, that's a bit easier to understand. Or try this one: if you take the fish out of a dirty fishbowl and clean off the fish, but don't take the time to change the water and clean the fishbowl, nothing really changes. The same could be said if youth are whisked away from their neighborhood to participate in programs; the kids might have a great time, but if, at day's end, we just drop them off at home and never look to see what they see day after day – abandoned buildings, graffiti, no food to eat, parents who might not be there – does anything really change? Programs work if they are part of a holistic solution that looks at the entire environment. We can't just build a recreation center and say, "Yup, now the kids have a place to go. That should solve the problems." The recreation center or programs need to be part of a larger solution. And that solution is environmental change.

There's a saying: If nothing changes, nothing changes. Nevertheless, change and organizing is slow and, sometimes, unseen. We meet often to discuss ways to make things better – how can we fill service gaps, what's the extent of the problem, how bad is it and has it gotten worse/better? We survey to find answers to the scope of the problem. (You can't know what to fix if you don't know the landscape – how can you fix your family budget if you haven't written down where you've spent your personal money?)

We're all about fixing the local landscape. People want to see change; they crave visible action. Action steps are environmental changes – we are literally trying to change the environment in which the substance abuse takes place. They include things like prevention efforts that look at conditions, systems and policies. How to change them to improve the environment? We might review and suggest policy changes; for example, do schools enforce suspensions equally across the board or are special considerations made for athletes? How do schools handle alcohol/drug offenses? How can we respond? It might be about raising taxes on certain substances, moving things behind the counter so they're not in easy access, not selling single serve containers of beer or individual cigarettes or cigarillos, improving lighting, cleaning up a neighborhood – or, most recently – wrist banding legal-aged drinkers at the Lorain International Festival.

The coalition recently helped card legal-aged patrons at the International Festival who were then given a wristband so they could purchase tickets for alcoholic beverages. We called it Banding Together in 2010 and we partnered with the Lorain Port Authority, the International Festival committee and Lorain Youth Baseball. This was a literal hands-on visible strategy. But some wonder how wrist banding prevents underage drinking (the coalition's focus); we know it's not a perfect solution, but it's another gateway in the process that makes us more aware if the folks we're serving can legally be served. Additionally, we trained volunteers as to proper carding techniques. We believe that by changing the environment and setting up stations to only card and wristband provides another gateway and cross-check system to help in preventing underage drinking. Is it perfect? No, but it's a step in the right direction.

Information dissemination and education are part of environmental strategies. Sometimes they are the ones we gravitate to because they seem easier. But we know it's time to jump in and start changing the landscape – literally. We need your help, so join us. Contact Catherine Gabe, coordinator at 282.9920 or cgabe@lorainadas.org