What is Environmental prevention?

Environmental prevention is based in the public health model, which stems from the premise that to affect health-related behaviors, prevention efforts must address the host, agent, and environment. In preventing alcohol, tobacco and other drug abuse, the host is the individual; the agent is alcohol, tobacco and other drugs; and the environment is the given community.

Many prevention approaches have had limited success because they only address one (the host) of those three entities. The agent and the environment are unaffected, creating a dynamic where individuals are expected to make healthy prevention choices in an environment that may support and encourage alcohol, tobacco, and other drug abuse and gambling. Environmental prevention strategies address the agent and environment, as well as the individual, providing a comprehensive approach to prevention

What is happening in my community that may need to be changed?

There are three very influential factors that influence the environment and may influence or contribute to risky behavior. These factors include the norms or attitudes of the people in the community, availability of substances within the environment, and the laws and policies that reinforce positive community norms. Specifically, these factors are defined:

Norms:
> Attitudes and behavior in the community concerning the acceptability or unacceptability of specific behaviors for a specific group of individuals

Availability:
> How much time, energy, and money must be expended to obtain a commodity (alcohol, marijuana, cigarettes). The more resources required, the lower the availability.

Regulations:
> Formalized laws, rules, policies that serve to control availability and codify norms and specify sanctions for violations

How do we know if our coalition is in a position to implement an environmental strategy?

It is easier to develop Environmental Strategies if you have identified the following:

- ✓ The problem in your community
- ✓ Who is directly affected by the problem(s) in your community?
- ✓ Who in the community will benefit if the problem is resolved?

What can we hope to accomplish through Environmental Strategies?

Advantages of Creating Environmental Strategies

• They impact the entire community, across the lifespan
• Help to facilitate long term solutions
• Will increase community awareness of alcohol, tobacco and other drug issues
• Identifies opportunities to act
• Instill a sense of empowerment in communities
• Creates new collaborations between community members, government and various systems
• Builds alliances between community members and key partners who serve the community
• Increases the impact of individually focused prevention strategies
• Increases the impact of treatment and support recovery

Changing community norms:

People typically adapt to the norms of their community. One of the strategies of environmental prevention is to change community norms so that high risk and illegal use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs is not acceptable.

Norms are not defined strictly as laws or policies. Enforcement of laws and policies are specifically addressed in another environmental strategy. Norms are often unwritten expectations or rules that a community holds, sometimes by default. For example, a community might believe that it's acceptable to provide alcohol to youth at graduation parties as long as an adult is present. Years ago, smokers could assume that smoking within the homes of friends and family was permissible – and would often do so without asking. That norm has changed: Those who smoke will usually ask if smoking is permitted in their host's home – or just assume smoking takes place outside.

EXAMPLE: Creating a health-promoting normative environment can include everything from promoting public events that are free from alcohol, tobacco and other drug use to educating community members about the real scope of alcohol, tobacco and other drug abuse within the community

Limiting Accessibility and Availability:

Accessing alcohol is not a difficult maneuver, even for those far below the legal drinking age of 21 years old. Alcohol outlets are plentiful, the staff at those establishments can be lax about checking identification, and fake IDs are common.

Those under legal purchasing age have little difficulty acquiring tobacco products, as well, due to some of the same conditions seen with alcohol availability. And despite law enforcement efforts, even simple access to illegal drugs is commonplace in many communities.

A key environmental strategy to reduce alcohol, tobacco and other drug abuse in a community is limiting access and availability of all of these substances, not just for those who are underage for alcohol and tobacco use, but for the entire community.

EXAMPLE: Communities can address access and availability in a variety of ways, some systematic (i.e.: addressing zoning issues) to small scale (i.e.: educating parents about disposing of outdated prescription medications).

Develop Media Messages:

Messages promoting alcohol, tobacco and other drugs are pervasive. These messages come from many sources including movies, television, radio, billboards, magazines, and the internet, sporting events, community festivals, posters, t-shirts and music.

Media messages about alcohol, tobacco and other drugs provide many opportunities for individuals to learn how to use, circumstances where it is acceptable or even desirable to use, how to improve their use techniques and an association with positive consequences of use. Advertising the two most abused drugs, alcohol and tobacco, alone provides ample opportunities for high risk messages about these substances. The alcohol and tobacco industries spend millions of dollars each year marketing their products, and for a good reason: it works.

Media messages do not only impact the individual. They also play a key role in establishing community norms. Therefore, impacting media messages not only impacts individuals, but also creates environmental change.

EXAMPLE: eliminating tobacco advertising on television in the 1970s contributed significantly to a change in the public's perception of smoking. Reducing the alcohol and tobacco industries' access to communities by prohibiting marketing and promotion to underage, high-risk, and intoxicated people can have a significant impact on substance abuse within a community.

This strategy has been used for decades by communities attempting to reduce alcohol, tobacco and other drug use within their environment. As a strategy, it can provide a clear target (i.e. local vendor) and a concrete "win" (i.e.: removal of a billboard) when efforts are successful.

Impact Policy:

A myriad of laws exist to address alcohol, tobacco and other drugs and gambling within communities, enforcement of those laws is uneven, sometimes even within a specific community. The same can be said for policies in school systems, workplaces, and other systems and locales within a community.

Communities can affect alcohol, tobacco and other drug use by advocating for increased enforcement of existing laws and policies. Enforcement of laws and policies can act as a deterrent to those who might otherwise break those laws and policies involving alcohol, tobacco and other drugs.

EXAMPLE: The first step in this strategy is often reviewing existing laws and policies to determine if they are appropriate and sufficient to the community. Key partners in this process include law enforcement, municipal leaders, and the gatekeepers for the systems with the policies needing attention. Communities may find that laws and policies need to change. Or they may find the current laws and policies sufficient but determine that enforcement is lacking. Changing laws and policies and increasing enforcement can lend itself to evolution in another environmental strategy – creating a health-promoting normative environment – as community members adapt to a new norm within their environment.