

Project III (Youth Based): The Chandler Coalition on Youth Substance Abuse

In 2006, a group of young residents gathered to identify issues critical to Chandler's youth. These kids, peer leaders in an organization called ICAN (ICAN used to stand for "Improving Chandler Area Neighborhoods" but now simply goes by its four-letter name), identified Underage Drinking as a critical issue among teens in the community. And from that dialogue, the Chandler Coalition on Youth Substance Abuse (CCYSA) was formed.

Background:

ICAN is a non-profit organization with a mission of providing free programs that empower youth to become productive, self confident, and responsible citizens. For the past 18 years, ICAN has joined with local community partners to initiate proactive prevention efforts to direct youth away from the streets and into more positive programs. The organization provides substance abuse and gang prevention programs to high-risk youth ages 5-18 in the Chandler Redevelopment Area (an area of approximately two square miles in the City's downtown core).

At the heart of the Coalition are the ICAN Peer Leaders. This group is tasked with learning leadership skills at ICAN and applying those skills through at least one monthly community service project. These kids were the driving force that gathered a Coalition of community stakeholders to serve as their advisors on addressing the issue of underage drinking.

They included Mothers Against Drunk Driving, the Arizona State Liquor License and Control Board, the Mayor's Office, Chandler Police and Fire departments, Neighborhood Services, and the Chandler Unified School District. Leading the process themselves and engaging ICAN staff, the teens developed and implemented a comprehensive community development strategy to address Underage Drinking with three main goals:

1. Decreasing alcohol advertisements/signage visible from the street by merchants in the Redevelopment Area
2. Decreasing the number of adults willing to buy alcohol for underage drinkers
3. Decreasing merchant sales to underage drinkers through increased carding

Through the mobilization of Coalition members, the teens organized and carried out several steps based on the three goals. They researched and gathered data to support their initiatives, while utilizing the resources of the stakeholder group to achieve success.

Actions included the identification of City ordinances on signage requirements, community education including a 30-minute show on the City's Cable Channel 11, a survey of consumers, and many other strategies. Utilizing these resources, the teens then collaborated with local merchants to remove alcohol signage,

provided free training to merchants on ID'ing, and educated various sectors of the community on the risks of underage drinking.

The Results:

Through the work of the Coalition, the community benefits in many ways. By promoting laws/norms that establish healthy beliefs and clear standards on underage drinking, the overall health of the community is positively impacted. Violence within the City is reduced, economic stability is promoted, and savings to the community from reduced demand for future health/social services related to alcohol abuse.

The measurable achievements of the group included:

- A 72.2 percent decrease in adults willing to purchase alcohol for a minor
- A 36 percent decrease in merchants willing to sell alcohol to a minor
- A 20.9 percent reduction in alcohol signage within the Chandler Redevelopment Area

Some of the key findings are noted by the teens:

Underage drinking is a very real problem for youth and our goal is to help educate others about the dangers associated with alcohol abuse. The CCYSA gives us an outlet to impact this problem and become leaders in our community. –Jonathon, age 18

Underage alcohol-related emergency room visits increase by 56% on Friday and Saturday nights as compared to weekdays for youth living in the Chandler Redevelopment Area. Drinking alcohol just isn't worth the risk of harming yourself or others. By being an active member of the CCYSA, I'm helping educate others about this community health issue. –Victoria, age 14

Selling alcohol to minors is unsafe, irresponsible, and illegal. The average age for a youth to first use alcohol in Chandler is 12.6 years old. I'm helping the CCYSA make a difference through education with merchants in our community, to keep youth in Chandler safe and alcohol free. –Ysabel, age 16

The Chandler Coalition on Youth Substance Abuse has also garnered regional and national attention. In 2008, the youth Coalition members were named State Citizens of the Year by the National Association of Social Workers. In 2009, the group was honored by the MetLife Foundation as one of six programs nationally for innovation in youth prevention programming.

Changing Lives

Not only is the CCYSA changing the norms that exist in our community for the health and safety of our youth, but it is also profoundly impacting those involved

in the program. Finally, consider Daniel: At the age of 17, Daniel first encountered ICAN's Peer Leadership program. Before getting involved, he wasn't making choices that he was proud of. He was hanging out with gang members and drug users, and started to get involved in both—introduced first through alcohol and binge drinking parties. Here is what Daniel has to say:

At the time, I didn't think there were any other alternatives and if there were, I didn't see them clearly enough. I didn't think I had a real future back then. We just got through each day and went on to the next not thinking about the consequences of our actions...alcohol had a lot to do with that.

One day it kind of hit me when I got in trouble at school. I was in trouble and I wasn't doing much to stop it. Detective Kelley from Chandler Police Department who was involved with CCYSA activities asked me to make a choice to stay out of trouble. He said ICAN and CCYSA would help me do this.

After six months of being involved, I have done all of the outreach projects and I feel really good about it. We are doing something positive for our community and for the kids that live here. We are really making a difference.

ICAN and CCYSA accepted me when I came to them and helped me turn things around. I have met positive people who encourage me. I really feel lucky to be a part of ICAN and CCYSA . And it's nice to see so many people from our community who care enough to make a difference.

By accepting and mentoring young people like Daniel, so many more Chandler youth stand a chance for success and a life without the harmful effects of underage drinking. Through a no-nonsense plan, the recruitment of some like-minded community individuals and organizations, the Peer group was able to make significant strides in the community. Signage, education, a few taps on the shoulder to point out indiscretions in the law, and a whole lot of determination has led to a remarkable story with equally remarkable results.