HARMONICS

Stronger Together!

Strengthening collaboration in the working group for Municipal Alcohol Policy for Youth in Sherbrooke

Policy Brief

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Key Points

- Sherbrooke Healthy City (Sherbrooke Ville en santé – SVS) has undertaken a project called the Politique municipale en matière d'alcool – Jeunesse (PMMA-Youth, or the Municipal Alcohol Policy) aimed at reducing alcohol-related harm among youth in the area.

- A working group of various organizations meets regularly and plans for collaborative action (e.g., a public awareness campaign called "Keep it social") to work on the Municipal Alcohol Policy.

- Despite the pandemic, the working group has remained robust. Recommendations for strengthening ongoing collaborative action include:

  ☐ Present compelling facts about the issues that need to be addressed.
  ☐ Include organizations with unique areas of focus in the working group, and allow members to learn about each other's work.
  ☐ Consult members widely to create a working group objective that is distinct from the mandate of any member organization.
  ☐ Use a win-win approach when planning action to help members become self-interested in collaboration.
  ☐ Invite like-minded organizations and those with pre-existing relationships to join the working group.
  ☐ Provide time for members to have open discussions and feel comfortable sharing ideas during meetings.
  ☐ Protect the confidentiality of information shared in the working group and allow members to participate on a voluntary basis.
  ☐ Bring attention to productivity by creating clear plans and objectives and then highlighting progress and achievements.
  ☐ Include experts and powerful actors on the working group.
  ☐ Leadership should promote engagement and participation by: having structured agendas and meetings, being passionate about community issues, being results-oriented, focusing on common objectives, and listening to members, understanding their organization's mandates, and recognizing their expertise.

Why is collaboration among organizations needed to reduce alcohol-related harm in young people?

Excessive drinking in young people poses serious health and safety risks.[1] While many youth will eventually change their consumption patterns as they age, excessive alcohol intake (particularly binge drinking) has immediate consequences, such as increasing the risk of injuries, motor vehicle collisions, violence, and risky sexual behaviours.[2] Young people are particularly vulnerable to risky drinking due to changes in the brain's socio-emotional system and under-developed self-regulation.

One questionnaire focusing on postsecondary students found that the reasons for drinking vary and include being social, celebrating, bonding with friends, and relieving stress and anxiety.[3] Being inebriated remains socially acceptable, and alcohol literacy is low.[3] Attitudes about alcohol (i.e., thinking that heavy drinking is not an issue and is normal in the postsecondary context) and expectations about consuming alcohol (i.e., having fun and feeling more confident) are also factors influencing heavy drinking among students.[1] Given this complexity, reducing alcohol-related harm in young people cannot be approached by a single intervention or organization; rather, collaboration and action across multiple organizations (including government sectors and departments, and non-governmental organizations) is needed.

Abbreviations:
SVS: Sherbrooke Ville en santé
PMMA – Jeunesse: Politique municipale en matière d'alcool – Jeunesse

What Sherbrooke is doing to reduce alcohol-related harm in young people.

There is a long history of collaboration among organizations in Sherbrooke, Québec to promote the health of its local residents. In 1987 Sherbrooke joined the WHO Healthy Cities network, and established the Sherbrooke Healthy City (*Sherbrooke Ville en santé* - SVS) project. Through collaboration across organizations and citizen participants, SVS aims to improve the health and quality of life of citizens and promote and support the sustainable development of healthy environments.[9] In 2016, SVS undertook a project aimed at reducing alcohol-related harm among youth in the area: the Politique municipale en matière d'alcool – Jeunesse (PMMA- Youth, or the Municipal Alcohol Policy)[5]. A working group of various organizations was established for the Municipal Alcohol Policy initiative, including college and university administrators, health professionals, public health representatives, the police force, the City of Sherbrooke, and one expert from the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction.[6] The working group meets three to four times annually and has launched an awareness campaign, "Keep it social". In 2019-2020 and again in 2021-2022, messages aimed at preventing heavy drinking among youth have been posted on social media and on the buses of Sherbrooke's public transport company.[7, 8]

The best drinking stories are the ones you remember.

JUST DO YOU

KEEP IT SOCIAL.ca

Strengthening collaboration in the working group for municipal alcohol policy.

The **HARMONICS** research team interviewed 12 members of the working group for the Municipal Alcohol Policy between January and October of 2021 with the aim of understanding how the organizations worked together in a sustainable manner to address alcohol-related harm among youth. While the working group has continued to meet regularly during the pandemic, recommendations based on findings from this research project for how to keep the collaboration strong are presented in relation to four themes of main findings: 1) fostering alignment, 2) building trust, 3) inducing and sustaining engagement, and 4) leadership.

Quotations:
All passages in quotation marks are direct quotes from interviewed working group members.

1. Fostering alignment

Recommendation: Present compelling facts about the issue that needs to be addressed to create aligned objectives across various organizations.

A key strategy used to align members' objectives was raising awareness of the need to address alcohol-related harm among youth by providing members with resources in the form of a research paper, infographics, and other local data about hospitalizations related to alcohol intake among youth. The use of data made members enthusiastic and motivated to participate because there was shared concern and responsibility with interest to move forward on the issue, which also created a sense of ownership over the working group across members. By identifying a problem collectively, members were able to align around a common objective, which facilitated implementation by enabling the working group to work together on an action plan.

"there are other committees that [...] have meetings, meetings, and then finally nothing happens because nobody agrees. Well with our committee, that's not the case. Really from the beginning, after seeing the statistics, we had a plan. We looked at what we could do, we asked the students for their opinion. And I think everyone agreed to help too."

"Everyone had to look in the mirror and think about what each institution and member of the community could do to reduce the problem"

Recommendation: Create a working group objective that is distinct from the objectives of any member organization and consult members widely to create a perception of fairness across organizations.

Since the objective of the working group did not fit into any one organization's purview, no organization had sole control or power over the issue, which made members feel like they had an equal share in the work. Furthermore, since organizations were also consulted about the action plan, there was a perception that everyone was being fairly represented in the work.

"Because there is no one around the table whose mission is to work on harm reduction among young people (the goal of the intersectoral action) and everyone was consulted, so there's a representativeness"

Recommendation: Include organizations with unique objectives on the working group and allow members to learn about each other's work to avoid overlap in working group member responsibilities.

Although there was some potential for conflict between member organizations due to having jurisdiction over similar issues in the community (e.g., harm-reduction), working group membership was selected with the intent of eliminating duplication of efforts in the community, with a focus on addressing gaps in the collective work.

"I think it's because it serves the mission of those who are already in place, it doesn't take anything away from them."

The working group allowed for regular communication among members, which helped members learn more about each other's work environment (their "sandbox") and further reduced the chance of overlap among member organizations. Understanding the other's sandbox involved understanding the values and work, and what's happening "on the ground" in other organizations, and this helped everyone better identify their respective roles. Moreover, when there were doubts about jurisdiction, the working group was a friendly place to communicate and usually avert any conflict.

2. Building trust

Recommendation: In the early stages of work, invite like-minded organizations and those with pre-existing relationships to join the working group to create shared values and a sense of trust among members.

Strong working relationships between some working group members contributed to the development of trust among members when the working group was forming. Information sharing between these members before joining the working group helped them feel less threatened when they had to share with others on the working group.

By inviting like-minded organizations to collaborate on the youth alcohol policy, it was possible to create an internal working group policy that outlined the shared values of partnership, social justice, and inclusion, which reduced conflicts between members over time. When conflicts arose, having widely shared values/objectives helped to achieve group consensus/cohesion since members were able to discuss the problems and find common ground to successfully resolve their conflicts even when they did not fully agree with each other.

"As we all had the same objective and the same central values, we could put aside our missions, our organisations, and see how we could integrate it [the policy] into our environment, as this is our priority in this context."

Recommendation: Provide time for members to have open discussions and feel comfortable sharing ideas during meetings.

Creating opportunities for members to openly discuss issues and contribute their ideas during meetings was a strategy used that led to a lasting sense of greater shared ownership. Leaders were willing to hear the thoughts of everyone, even ideas that were not feasible. Members were more motivated to participate because they felt comfortable sharing with others during meetings and felt heard in the process, which ultimately reduced their fear of losing control. The informal atmosphere of meetings also allowed for discussion about the importance of taking action on issues beyond youth alcohol use and resulted in new partnerships and ongoing communication between member organizations to address some of those issues.

"everybody can speak easily around the table, there's no discomfort, you know. I think that a good leader is able to understand [their] members and then see how we can modulate with each and everyone … [they are] able to put us at ease"

3.   Inducing and sustaining engagement

Recommendation: Use a win-win approach to help members become self-interested in collaboration.

A win-win approach, where collaboration is structured in a way that satisfies the interests of all participants, helped facilitate collaboration and strengthen buy-in. Various members identified specific interests in addressing alcohol-related harm in youth, and subsequently became more invested in collaboration. Having aligned objectives helped members identify unique benefits through collaboration to address alcohol-related harm among youth at a time when not all members were committed to working together. These benefits included receiving resources and training, as well as opportunities for collaboration with other sectors that would not have materialized before. Some members suggested that this helped them see how their organizations could get their "money's worth" from working to address alcohol-related harm among youth. It was also reported that when they could not see how their interests aligned with the working group's objectives, they continued to participate in meetings but prioritized the work less and thus were less involved over time; while others reported becoming more engaged when the group's objectives matched their goals.

"I'm sure I'll continue to participate as long as it's moving, in line with my work."

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Recommendation: Protect the confidentiality of information shared in the working group and allow members to participate on a voluntary basis to overcome reluctance to participate and to incentivize engagement.

The working group was structured in ways that helped overcome reluctance to participate and incentivized engagement. Legal agreements were developed and signed to protect the privacy of members when disclosing data to the working group, which encouraged buy-in from members who were initially hesitant to participate. Members participated in a voluntary capacity on the working group, which encouraged engagement because members did not feel like they had to implement actions set out by the working group, thus allowing their organizations to retain control in the process.

Recommendation: Bring attention to the productivity of the working group in meetings by creating clear plans and objectives and then highlighting progress and achievements to promote ongoing engagement.

Hearing about progress and achievements, staying focused on taking action and making clear plans, and developing partnerships were all seen as early accomplishments by members of the working group. For example, one member described with pride an instance when the project was presented to an audience of federal ministers. Early accomplishments gave members the perception that their work was manageable even though it was complex, which helped them to see the working group as having value and encouraged them to remain engaged and continue participating. Over time, working group members also felt inspired by successes and began to anticipate work needed to prepare for meetings and actively prepared collaboratively for work before meetings, resulting in productive meetings as the working group matured.

"it's also motivating for the partners. They say OK at each meeting, we don't meet for nothing. There is an objective and then we see that we are making progress. We tick off another stage."

"having tangible projects to measure and put forward or defend before the community was a definite motivator for me. And that's why I continued to participate."

"I'm going to do my homework before arriving […] people prepare themselves, do some reading as well, so it's a bit of a ripple effect."

Strengthening Collaboration

Recommendation: Include experts and powerful actors on the working group to increase the legitimacy and attractiveness of collaboration for members.

The working group included people with political power (e.g., the mayor) and those with expertise in youth alcohol use (e.g., physicians), and these members increased the attractiveness of collaboration for other members. Having powerful actors on the working group raised the profile of the work being done to address youth alcohol use, which encouraged some new members to get involved in the collaboration. The inclusion of people with political power also led to buy-in from some members because of the networking opportunities it presented. The presence of people with expertise increased the perceived legitimacy of the working group and helped to frame youth alcohol use as a serious problem.

"You don't want to have a problem in a committee, you put a doctor there and then you're sure that there won't be any bickering."

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4. Leadership

Recommendation: Leadership should promote engagement and participation through various strategies, such as: having structured agendas and meetings, being passionate about community issues, being results-oriented, focusing on common objectives, and listening to members, understanding their organization's mandates, and recognizing their expertise.

"It's a unifying leadership. It's a very results-oriented leadership […] with a capacity to mobilize and then to be very focused. […] Her leadership, the fact of being curious and then wanting to be able to find the best ways to arrive at solutions and to open up and take all the possible poles, well, that helps."

Leaders of the working group promoted engagement and participation through numerous actions/approaches that helped members identify common values and set aside their priorities, including:

- Having structured agendas and meetings.

- Respecting each organization's mandates and recognizing members for their unique expertise, which supported buy-in early on and increased members' interest in the collaborative work.

- Creating a sense of belonging by communicating in a convincing and inspiring way about community issues.

- Reassuring members about engaging in difficult conversations by creating a sense of belonging and emphasizing the confidentiality of working group discussions.

- Encouraging and motivating members to set aside their priorities during meetings to focus on the common objectives.

- Ensuring the completion of work.

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