POSITION STATEMENT

Implications of increased access to alcohol

Issued by: the Board of Directors

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Our Place does not support increased access to alcohol in our community.

Issue:

Privatizing liquor distribution, especially sales through private corner or grocery retail outlets, will increase access to alcohol in our community. Research has shown that increased access leads to increased consumption and alcohol-related problems in our society.\(^1\) Our Place serves a group of individuals where the negative impacts of liquor privatization will be directly felt. We believe there are significant individual and social costs of providing easier access to the sale of alcohol for the people we serve.

Background:

The cycle of mental illness, alcohol and drug addiction is well known within the population group served by Our Place. Evidence-based research consistently shows alcohol-based problems are the issues most likely to affect the users of homeless services.\(^2\) The current lack of adequate and sufficient detox services in the Greater Victoria area creates additional challenges and an increase of alcohol availability, particularly in local grocery outlets, will exacerbate an already significant problem.\(^3\)

Policies and practice which prioritize consumer convenience, the value of increased revenues and minor technical problems found in older Liquor Act Regulations should be balanced against the social costs of permitting easier access to alcohol.\(^4\)

Our Place is not only deeply involved in dealing with existing homelessness conditions, but vitally concerned about how to prevent it. Alcohol misuse contributes to people becoming

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\(^1\) Provincial Liquor Boards: Meeting the Best Interests of Canadians, MADD Canada Backgrounder, May 2013.


\(^4\) Babor, et al ibid.
homeless. Addiction disrupts relationships with family and friends and often causes people to lose their jobs. For people who are already struggling to maintain a residence, the onset or exacerbation of an addiction may cause them to lose their home.

Studies indicate that two-thirds of people experiencing homelessness have reported that drugs and/or alcohol were a major reason for their becoming homeless.\(^5\) People who are homeless often turn to drugs and alcohol to cope with their personal situations using substances to try and obtain temporary relief from their problems. In reality, however, substance dependence only aggravates their problems and decreases their ability to achieve employment stability and get off the streets. Increasing access to alcohol will not improve these situations.

Breaking an addiction cycle is tremendously difficult and this is especially true for people who are living on the streets. The motivation to stop using substances is invariably poor. For the people we serve, survival is often more important than personal growth over drug counseling and everything else. Many of these people are alienated from families and friends and, without a social support network, recovering from an alcohol addiction becomes even more difficult.

B.C. is ranked 9\(^{th}\) out of ten provinces in Canada on the extent to which alcohol pricing policies are consistent with public health objectives.\(^6\) B.C. is also ranked last in Canada for its alcohol control system, which researchers base on variables such as government control over the liquor retailing system, alcohol sales beyond on-premise and off-premise outlets and an overall emphasis on social responsibility. Further, it is important to note that the direct government costs related to crime and health care in British Columbia are slightly higher than the revenues obtained (approximately $1 billion per year).\(^7\)

Evidence-based research also demonstrates that reducing access to alcohol by restricting the number of alcohol outlets and limiting the hours and days when existing outlets are open decreases the likelihood of experiencing alcohol-related harm, e.g. assaults, impaired driving and public disturbances, from occurring.\(^8\)

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\(^7\) Ibid.

Proposed Solutions:
Recommendations:

- that access to liquor not be eased as this will adversely affect those living with alcohol addictions.

- that the distribution management of liquor should remain with the public sector, overseen by professional public sector administrators who are inherently required by the nature of their profession to balance corporate profit-making needs with those of public interest which include social and health costs.

- that the provincial government adopt a transparent set of standardized indicators that enable government and health officials to monitor health and safety outcomes from alcohol use.

- that, along with general public input, independent evidence-based research be equally applied to the means by which government ultimately derives alcohol sale and distribution policies.

- that misuse of alcohol use in all areas be actively discouraged.

- that all interest groups concerned with the effects of alcohol proliferation in our communities should work together to develop consistent public messaging.