

Breaking unhealthy traditions: Community solutions to substance abuse in Hinton, Alberta

“There’s an attitude that I’ve found as someone moving into this town around the bush parties and drinking and all of that of, ‘We did it when we were kids and what harm can it come to?’ And to try to explain that to parents that the things that are out there are much worse than the things that they knew. But there is an attitude, ‘Well, we did it and we’re still here to speak if it so...’”

- Research participant

Introduction

Tackling a community issue such as substance abuse is not an easy task. First, a community must understand “why” individuals are abusing alcohol and drugs. In 2005, researchers set out to explore the contributing factors to substance abuse in the Town of Hinton. Interviews with Hinton residents revealed that one of the main causes of substance abuse is the lack of healthy social connections among family and community members. Research participants said that, in many cases, the limited number of healthy social connections and abuse of alcohol and drugs is due to the intergenerational transfer of unhealthy beliefs (e.g., binge drinking is acceptable) and behaviours (e.g., using alcohol or drugs as a coping mechanism).

Solutions

To address the issue of substance abuse in the Town of Hinton, research participants offered a number of solutions – spanning the areas of prevention, intervention, treatment and post-treatment – including:

- **Reinforce protective factors in children and youth**



“If you think you’re going to protect children by waving a wand over their head at grade 5, you’re sadly mistaken.”

- Research participant

Protective factors must be in place early on and be continually reinforced in children and youth. Parents, teachers and community members must: encourage these young individuals academically and recreationally; teach them good communication skills and foster openness; discipline them

appropriately so that they develop a respect for parents, elders, and property; and ensure that they have positive role models and a social support system available to them in the community.

- **Increase early intervention and support for troubled families**

To break the intergenerational cycle of substance abuse, the community needs to do more interventions into families where parents are abusing alcohol and drugs, increase programming for children and youth who are either involved or affected by alcohol and drug abuse, offer targeted parenting classes (and ensure at-risk parents are able to attend by providing transportation and childcare arrangements if necessary), and develop a foster care system for parents returning from treatment (who do not have a safe and supportive home) to help reintegrate these parents back into the community.

- **Foster healthy, supportive workplaces (and stop “enabling”)**

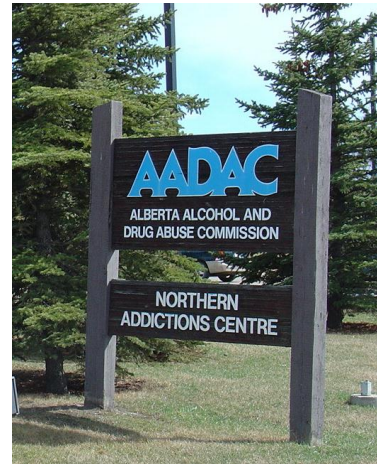
“Certainly people on their shift, they don’t want to believe it, they don’t think it’s impacting them, and they’ll cover up until the point where it’s really dangerous, or when management is starting to see it too, and there’s a real group mentality of here to protect.”

- Research participant

Employers and employees must stop enabling their coworkers who have substance use and addiction issues. That is, they must stop “covering up” for individuals. This will require that both parties be educated about the harms associated with enabling and that workplaces foster an open and supportive environment where employees feel comfortable in approaching the union and/or management if they or their coworkers have a substance use or addiction issue. And, if workplaces do not have an Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) in place, they need to consider implementing an EFAP program or developing creative ways to help their employees address substance use or addiction issues, such as implementing alcohol and drug abuse education programs, offering flexible work schedules to allow for treatment, etc.

- **Open a local or regional detoxification centre**

Although substance abuse is a major issue for many rural communities along the Yellowhead Corridor and across the province, most of the detoxification and treatment centres are located in urban centres, such as Edmonton, Calgary, and Grande Prairie. To better meet the needs of people living in Hinton and surrounding communities, and to allow for family involvement in the recovery process, the province needs to open a detoxification/treatment centre in the area.



Barriers to Solutions

Even after identifying a variety of solutions, research participants pointed out several complicating factors which may make implementing solutions difficult. These factors include the denial associated with addiction which often leads to individuals hitting “rock bottom” before they seek help; the labour shortage which has employers desperate and turning a “blind eye” to employees with substance use or addiction issues; the negative and detached community attitude toward individuals with substance addictions and the low level of empathy and community-wide support to help these troubled individuals; and challenges within the justice system such as inadequate policing resources and penalties to deter alcohol- and drug-related crime. These barriers must also be considered when developing a community response to the substance abuse issue.

Conclusion

The abuse of alcohol and drugs in Hinton is deeply rooted in family, work, and community life. As the root causes of substance abuse are multi-faceted, addressing the issue requires a broader dialogue and the development of holistic, well-integrated solutions, now and into the future. If left unchecked, substance abuse will continue to place downward pressure on community sustainability, decreasing human capacities, limiting healthy social connections, and affecting future generations.

For the full project report, *Beyond Boredom: Contributing factors to substance abuse in Hinton, Alberta*, see:

http://www.fmf.ca/SS/SS_report10.pdf

This Quicknote is one in a series of three:

For a summary of the main contributing factors to substance abuse in Hinton, see the Quicknote: *Five community risk factors for substance abuse in Hinton, Alberta.*

For a summary of how the oil and gas boom is affecting Hinton residents, see the Quicknote: *Boom times in Hinton, Alberta: The benefits and challenges of a changing economy.*