



Multi-sector Harm Prevention Alliance: Bellingham, WA

Supports Healthy Businesses, Healthy Choices About Drinking

Bellingham's Hospitality Resource Alliance (HRA) brings together community stakeholders to collaboratively prevent and address issues related to alcohol use and public safety. A 10 year history with varied projects, changing levels of activity and coordination challenges and successes, HRA's mission statement has remained the same since its founding: "Through community involvement and shared responsibility, HRA promotes sound business practices that influence customers to make healthy choices about their drinking and provides safe settings for informal public life that is essential to the community." The HRA is currently developing an educational campaign focused on young bar patrons in the downtown area.

Problem Statement

As a college town, intoxication and public safety are long-standing issues in the downtown area, and the HRA was initially formed as a way for the local hospitality industry to play a positive role in addressing these issues. The need to increase communication between bars and law enforcement was identified, and various enforcement agencies joined the group. Improving communication and coordination between bars, law enforcement, and others concerned with downtown issues (see "Stakeholders" below) continues to be a primary focus of the HRA.

The mission statement of the HRA has remained constant since the group's formation: "Through community involvement and shared responsibility, the Hospitality Resource Alliance promotes sound business practices that influence customers to make healthy choices about their drinking and provides safe settings for informal public life that is essential to the community."

Like many communities across the country, Bellingham has been faced with the many challenges of growth and development in recent years, including a downtown that is increasingly residential. Achieving a balance of housing and a vibrant nightlife, managing and resolving conflict about noise, and ensuring public safety downtown are all current concerns.

The statewide indoor smoking ban that went into effect in 2005 has made it more difficult for bar staff to be aware of customers' alcohol consumption and level of intoxication. Before the indoor smoking ban, when customers repeatedly left and re-entered the bar, it was considered a "red flag" suggesting outside drinking or illicit drug use, and such customers were watched carefully or even denied re-entry. Since the ban, more customers are leaving and re-entering more frequently – ostensibly to smoke, but it is difficult to discern who has gone out for just a cigarette and who may have procured and/or consumed outside alcohol or other drugs.

Stakeholders

Primary HRA stakeholders include bar owners and staff, representatives from the Liquor Control Board, Bellingham Police Department, WWU's violence prevention programs, the Campus Community Coalition, the Downtown Renaissance Network (a business improvement district), Bellingham's Downtown Alliance for Music and Nightlife, neighborhood associations, county Traffic Safety Task Force, and local alcohol distributors.

One group of stakeholders that has not participated is downtown residents; current HRA members agree that it would be beneficial to have residents involved and will be exploring ways to invite them.

The most recent new participant was the president of a neighborhood association from an area adjacent to both downtown and the university.

Process

The history of the HRA has not been a consistent or linear process, as the timeline illustrates. Funding, staffing and participation have varied during the HRA's twelve years, and the level of activity has therefore also fluctuated. However, the Campus Community Coalition has remained constant in the role of coordinator/convener, and several bar owners stayed involved with the CCC even during the times when the HRA did not convene official meetings.

After a two-year hiatus, the HRA reconvened in August 2007 to respond to hospitality concerns regarding licensing procedures and law enforcement practices. An initial meeting and individual conversations with bar owners and staff clearly revealed frustration and mistrust, and the need to re-establish the channels of communication with local law enforcement agencies.

Two meetings, held in September and October 2007, were dedicated specifically to bringing together bar owners and staff with representatives from the Liquor Control Board and Bellingham Police Department to air concerns, share information and clarify perspectives. Through these discussions trust began to build, and in December the group moved on to identify common concerns and goals regarding late-night activity downtown and ways to address concerns both individually and collectively. Members have recently started working together on a customer education campaign.

Meetings are convened and facilitated by the coordinator of the Campus Community Coalition. Every meeting has an agenda with a focus area(s) – vs. general, open discussion – such as issues or concerns raised by group members, or a specific project such as the current customer education campaign.

Collaboration, mutual respect, and shared responsibility are emphasized at each meeting by reviewing the group's Discussion Ground Rules and description of Shared Responsibility. This both introduces our tenets to new participants and reinforces them for regular members.

HRA Discussion Ground Rules

- Listen and consider the opinions of others
- "Share the air time" – let everyone speak
- Stay focused on the issues
- Limit side conversations
- Avoid accusations and finger pointing

Shared Responsibility

- No one has all the responsibility
- Everyone has some responsibility
- Everyone can contribute to solutions
- Small individual changes = big collective impact

HRA participation is consistent with 15-20 people meeting every 4-6 weeks, and new members continue to join the group. The list of potential members grows mainly by word of mouth. Meeting invitations are sent by both hardcopy postcards and email, and go to multiple people within a business or organization to ensure that the information is widely distributed.

Outcome

The primary result of the recent HRA meetings is an increased sense of trust and cooperation among the stakeholders. This has led to the commitment to work together to implement a customer education campaign, which is currently in the planning stages. The group is in the process of defining the campaign goals, identifying the target audience, and developing messages and will determine ways to involve the various partners in communicating the messages.

Because to some extent there is inherent competition between bars, the HRA is also instrumental in providing the structure for bar owners and staff to come to the table as collaborators.

Members also have a greater appreciation of the concerns and challenges of those on different "sides" and there is an increased awareness that in spite of many differences, there are many common concerns and goals among group members. Facilitated discussions have clarified that there is agreement about the major alcohol-related problems

downtown (assault, harassment, fights, property damage, vandalism, litter) as well as a shared vision for downtown – fun, safe, full of people, diverse, friendly, etc.

The HRA has also created a neutral place to talk about contentious issues. For example, the relative responsibility of the bar vs. individual customers in determining “how much [alcohol] is too much” has been the focus of numerous discussions. Different opinions are apparent in that some members use the term “over-service,” while others use the term “overconsumption,” each term implying a different responsibility. At times the combined term “over-service/overconsumption” has been used to explicitly convey that it is a shared responsibility of BOTH bar staff and customers. Similarly, the extent to which bars should be held accountable for the actions of their customers when they are not on the premises has been an ongoing point of discussion.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

One challenge has been mistrust among members. Because of the complexity of the issues, unequal relationships, and the diverse interests at stake, there are some inherent tensions among members. Members are business competitors, enforcers and “enforcees,” and in some cases simply have strained personal relationships with each other due to difficult histories.

Another challenge is that throughout the HRA’s history, the group seems to have relied on the coordinator of the CCC to keep it going. This coordination has been inconsistent over the years due to CCC staff turnover and competing program priorities, which has contributed to the variable level of activity.

We have learned that the HRA seems to be the most effective when there is a consistent coordinator to convene and facilitate the meetings, provide guidance to the group’s activities, be a point person for individual questions and concerns, and work with the group in ways that include an inclusive process, relationship building and tangible results. Some characteristics that have proved beneficial are: being in a neutral position, strong communication and interpersonal skills, group facilitation and conflict management, and an understanding of community organizing principles.

Jurisdiction

The Hospitality Resource Alliance encompasses all of Bellingham, a community of about 75,000 in northwest Washington state. Recently emphasis has been placed on the city’s Central Business District or downtown core (“downtown”), where the majority of its 227 liquor licensees are located. Downtown is about half a mile from the campus of Western Washington University (WWU), which has 13,500 students; it is also adjacent to several neighborhoods with a high density of student housing.

Funding

Funding for the HRA has varied since its inception. First funded by the local STAR Task Force, it later received funds from the Washington State Liquor Control Board. When the Western Washington University–Bellingham Campus Community Coalition (CCC) was formed in 1999, coordination for the HRA was incorporated into the responsibilities of the CCC Coordinator. Hence, grant funds that were awarded to the CCC from sources such as Department of Education, Department of Justice, and the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism also supported the work of the HRA.

Spin-off Projects

There are two partner organizations with which the HRA overlaps to some extent, in that they also deal with downtown issues: the Downtown Renaissance Network and Bellingham's Downtown Alliance for Music and Nightlife. The existence of the HRA, with its focus on addressing broad issues through multi-sector collaboration, allows these organizations to take on more specific projects in downtown improvement and policy work.

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