



Tackling Off-premise Underage Sales: Washington, DC

Press Event/Cops in Shops Breaks Down Cultural Barriers

In 2001 Washington D.C. Metropolitan Police Department launched an anti-underage drinking initiative, including a Cops in Shops program in which undercover police officers posed as store clerks. The Century Council and the Hospitality Resource Panel engaged local distributors, Asian American merchants associations, the local restaurant associations, and the city's office of Asian/Pacific Islander Affairs as partners. Because of racial tension in the city amongst Asian liquor store owners and mainly black residents, the involvement of the Asian merchants was especially important to the success of the project.

Problem Statement

Underage drinking is a real problem in the DC area. Because 70% of beer and wine and 30% of off-premise licensed beverage stores in Washington, DC are owned by Asian Americans (mostly Korean) but the majority of DC residents and city regulators including the police force are black, there is tension between the black and Asian communities. There is a level of distrust amongst store owners and customers who feel they are being disrespected and overcharged by the stores while store owners feel victimized and threatened by the residents of the neighborhood and believe that the police do not take their problems and calls for service seriously.

Stakeholders

- HRP
- Century Council
- Police
- Store Owners
- Prevention Groups

Process

Identify and convene stakeholders including HRP, Century Council, police, store owners, and prevention groups. Agree to facilitate Cops in Shops effort using undercover police as store clerks. Bring stakeholder resources together to promote effort, including organizing press conference, store owner recruitment, and outreach to Asian and Spanish newspapers and DC high school journalism students to cover the process.

Outcome

The project was introduced in May 2001 through a well attended and well executed press conference. From May through October, 2001 more than 50 stores participated in the initiative leading to more than 750 arrests. The anti-underage programs have continued to receive grant funding, as well as public and governmental support. Outreach to the Asian community continues on many fronts including recruitment of Asian community members in public and private grant programs geared towards improved compliance and community relations.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Fear amongst store owners of repercussions for participating in effort or being seen as pro-police. Inability of city government and police to communicate effectively with Asian community. Difficulty getting all the stakeholders comfortable and working together. Difficulty in communicating to store owners that the police were there to work with them and not to investigate them and their businesses.

Jurisdiction

Business, District

Start Date: 5/1/2001

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