

Environmental Strategies

Environmental strategies are focused on changing aspects of the environment that contribute to the use of alcohol and other drugs. Specifically, environmental strategies aim to decrease the social and health consequences of substance abuse by limiting access to substances and changing social norms that are accepting and permissive of substance abuse. They can change public laws, policies and practices to create environments that decrease the probability of substance abuse.

Best Approach

**Environmental +
Individual Approaches**

Individual Strategies & Environmental Strategies

Broadly defined, individual strategies are short-term actions focused on changing individual behavior, while environmental strategies involve longer-term, potentially permanent changes that have a broader reach (e.g., policies and laws that affect all members of society). The most effective prevention plans will use both environmental and individual substance abuse prevention strategies.

Principles for Developing Strategies for the Shared Environment

Environmental theory suggests that there are three critical components to environmental strategies of prevention: community norms, availability of substances and local regulations. It proposes that strategies targeting all youth in a community differ from those utilized when targeting individual youth. Environmental strategies are meant to support all community youth in positive activities and thwart them in negative actions.

- The strongest prevention approaches will derive from considering norms, regulations and availability as a comprehensive package.
- A strategy aimed at any one of these components should be viewed as an entry point into a systems consideration of all three.

The most effective prevention plans will use both environmental and individual substance abuse prevention strategies. Environmental strategies focus on changing the underlying contextual processes that contribute to substance use and are useful for three reasons:

1. Efficiency

- Strategies directed at the shared environment are efficient because they affect every member of the target population. For example, training convenience store clerks to check IDs reduces the availability of alcohol and tobacco for local youth.
- Environmental strategies have enduring effects. When policy, regulation, or norms are changed they remain so for a very long time.
- When in place, environmental strategies are often easily maintained and cost effective. Seatbelt use is an example of an easily maintained environmental strategy which began through regulation and has become the norm. The initial cost may be high, but after the behavior becomes the norm, it is self-sustaining, reducing costs. The "crash-test dummies" are now retired after making seat belt use the norm for over 85 percent of the U.S. population.

2. Celerity

Strategies aimed at the shared environment often produce results much faster than strategies aimed at individual environments. For example, enforcing the alcohol purchase age compared to increasing alcohol prices (manipulations of availability) can produce immediate reductions in youth alcohol use.

3. Enhancement

Many communities currently have little in the way of a coordinated approach addressing the shared environment that complement their individualized strategies. An environmental approach brings a shared focus to these individual strategies, providing a community response that may encompass reaching out to all community members:

- Youth and adults
- Consumers, sellers and marketers
- Health providers, clients and the public
- Constituents and policymakers
- Faith leaders and their congregations
- Community leaders and their neighborhoods
- Law enforcement, the courts and legal systems