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CROSS-BORDER DRINKING PROJECT HAILED AS 'MODEL PROGRAM'

S.D. Project Deemed Ready to Adapt Along U.S.-Mexican Border

U.S.-MEXICAN BORDER, SAN YSIDRO — The San Diego-Tijuana Border Project to reduce cross-border underage and binge drinking has been named a national Model Program by the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention. CSAP announced the distinction June 7 at its annual Exemplary Substance Abuse Prevention Programs Award Ceremony in Washington, D.C. A news conference was held in San Diego the same day to recognize individuals and organizations who have played a key role in the project.

The Border Project was one of 30 exemplary substance abuse programs recognized this year among 200 reviewed for their work to reduce and prevent drug and alcohol abuse. Established in 1997 and funded largely by the County of San Diego, it was selected based on its effectiveness, consistency and potential for replication.

“All communities struggle to fight the incidence of underage drinking, but here in San Diego County we have the added challenge of our proximity to the international border with Mexico, where the legal drinking age is 18,” said Supervisor Greg Cox, whose district represents the nation's busiest border crossing. “The County of San Diego has committed to working with our community partners to reduce the negative consequences of cross-border drinking, and we have begun to see success. I am proud that the federal government has recognized this effort by declaring the San Diego-Tijuana Border Project to be a Model Program.”

Based on the San Diego County Prevention Framework for reducing alcohol and drug problems, the Border Project brings together law enforcement coordination, high-profile newsmaking, data collection and public-health-oriented policy advocacy. It represents a partnership between the Institute for Public Strategies (IPS), a nonprofit public health agency that conducts the project, and the County of San Diego. The Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation (PIRE) collects data and assesses the effort's results.

“The County of San Diego is proud to be part of the Border Project, and we are honored to be recognized as a CSAP Model Program,” said Al Medina, Administrator of Alcohol and Drug Services, San Diego County Health and Human Services Agency. “Its success shows the promise of the public health model of prevention. Now other communities along the border facing similar problems will have access to a blueprint that is proven to be effective.”

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Since the Border Project began there has been a 37% reduction in late-night border crossers with a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) at or above .08 and a 26% reduction in the overall number of late-night crossers returning from Mexico on Friday and Saturday nights. There was also a reduction of DUI fatalities in the San Diego-Tijuana Border region from 23 in 1999 to 5 in 2000.

Among other achievements, the Border Project has initiated a Binational Policy Council on illicit drugs, pharmaceutical drug problems and alcohol. As a result of its work, more than 800 news stories in the print, television and radio media (in Spanish and English) have been generated to highlight cross-border drinking problems and solutions.

“These outcomes are encouraging, but much more needs to be done,” said James Baker, executive director of IPS. “Our youth are inundated with advertisements that encourage them to circumvent U.S. laws and drink in Mexico. Further, there is still a high volume of intoxicated pedestrian youth crossing back into the U.S. who often become intoxicated drivers. We must continue to work collaboratively to address these issues.”

IPS is working with other prevention groups, law enforcement agencies and elected officials in the San Diego region to block the efforts of bar promoters who target youth with their ads by exploiting current weaknesses in the law. Another goal is to boost interventions at the border to prevent intoxicated pedestrians from driving. The agency is also studying the public health effects of minimum legal drinking age (MLDA) laws in different countries and cultures. Now that the Border Project has been deemed officially successful and worthy of replication, IPS is seeking to adapt it to communities along the entire U.S.-Mexico border.

According to a comprehensive telephone poll commissioned by IPS, 84% of San Diego County residents think underage drinking in Mexico by San Diego youth is a serious problem, and 77% say cross-border drinking negatively affects the quality of life in local communities. In the same poll, strong majorities of registered voters supported increased law enforcement at the border (93%) and restrictions on ads targeting underage youth to drink in Mexico (80%).

The Model Programs honored at the Exemplary Awards underwent an expert consensus review of published and unpublished materials to ensure that they were well implemented and well evaluated and produced consistent, positive results. These determinations were made using the criteria established by CSAP’s National Registry of Effective Prevention Programs, which encompasses 15 separate dimensions.

Visit the Border Project’s website at www.publicstrategies.org/border_project.htm or call Sandra Hoover at (619) 474-8844, ext. 21, to learn more. Journalists covering issues related to alcohol and drugs can find current facts, reports, contact information and other resources at the Substance Abuse Newsroom, www.alcoholdrugnewsroom.org.

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