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Recover Alaska: Healing Alaska's Alcohol Problems

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Alcohol is used by a large segment of the population and is one of the most commonly abused substances. National surveys reveal that 7 out of 10 adults in the U.S. and Alaska drank alcohol in the past year and more than half of all adults report past month alcohol use. While alcohol is part of our social culture and frequently plays a role in celebrations, it is often a factor in tragedies. The National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence estimates that alcohol is a factor in 40 percent of all violent crimes, and is often an element in non-stranger violence, including intimate partner violence, sexual assault, and child abuse.

Excessive alcohol use has enormous social and economic costs. In Alaska parental

alcohol abuse has been cited by the Office of Children's Services (OCS) as the reason for a child's removal from the home in 31 to 47 percent of all maltreatment cases between 2011 and 2015. Both parental alcohol use and removal of a child from the home have lasting consequences for the family and the community. Another consequence of excessive alcohol use is alcohol-induced mortality. The alcohol-induced mortality rate for all Alaskans has remained at least twice as high as the average U.S. rate for over a decade, and has remained at least six times as high for Alaska Natives. In 2014, the age-adjusted alcohol-induced mortality rate in Alaska was 17.8 per 100,000 Alaskans while the average rate for the U.S. was 8.5 per 100,000 (see Figure 1, page 11). Many individual projects and programs have previously been implemented to address the harmful consequences of alcohol use in our state. But until recently Alaska has lacked a coordinated, multi-pronged response to alcohol problems.

Over the past few years an innovative approach—Recover Alaska—has evolved to address Alaska's alcohol-related problems. This initiative aims to reduce excessive alcohol use and related harm in Alaska by

influencing social norms and perceptions about alcohol use and abuse. Through bringing together stakeholders statewide, Recover Alaska seeks more coordinated responses to alcohol-related issues. It also advocates for change in systems and for effective laws and policies about alcohol. Recover Alaska was developed by a group of knowledgeable and influential funding partners—Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority, Mat-Su Health Foundation, and Rasmuson Foundation. These organizations recognized the need for a comprehensive and coordinated approach to target alcohol problems in Alaska and brought together a statewide, multi-sector steering committee to consider strategies. Since then, South-central Foundation, Providence Health and Services, and the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services have joined in supporting the Recover Alaska initiative.

This article provides a brief overview of the strategies being implemented by Recover Alaska to achieve its mission. An important element of the initiative is an evaluation plan to gauge the impact of this new approach to alcohol abuse.

Please see **Recover Alaska**, page 11

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- **Therapeutic Courts in the Alaska Court System** (page 2).
- **Alaska Felony Sentencing Patterns: Selected Findings** (page 6).
- **Teens Acting Against Violence (TAAV) and the 40 Developmental Assets** (page 8).

Editor's Goodbye

With this issue of the *Alaska Justice Forum*, my eight-year tenure as editor ends. It has been my privilege to build on the foundation created by my predecessor, Antonia Moras, who edited this publication for over 20 years. I want to thank all the university and community partners who have contributed to publishing Alaska justice research, especially our Justice faculty and staff, and guest authors. And I also want to express my appreciation to all those in the Justice community, public and private entities, and individuals across the state, who have so generously given of their time to assist in answering questions and providing data for a variety of articles and topics. Lastly, I want to acknowledge the assistance of the *Forum* editorial board and the Justice Center Publication Specialist. With their help, the roughly drafted articles and statistical tables and charts are turned into a polished publication.

“Leading Alaska to a safer, healthier, and more just society” is the Justice Center's vision statement. The goal of the *Forum* is to contribute to that vision. I have tried to ensure that the articles in the *Forum* continue to focus on the broad landscape of justice issues and look at the connection between public health and justice. My aim has always been to be an advocate for our readers so that research and information are presented in a way that is accessible and interesting to the general reader, as well as to specialists in the field, practitioners, and academics. By providing research and analysis on an array of justice topics to legislators, agencies, policymakers, and the university and general community, the *Forum* serves an important role in Alaska. We hope to engage our readers in a conversation about these issues and to keep the conversation going. I am grateful to have been a part of this process.

— *Barbara Armstrong*