

# Coalition seeks to initiate positive change

By Danielle Frost

Smoke Signals staff writer

What constitutes substance use – and abuse – can be a touchy subject and garner as many opinions as those discussing it.

However, there's one point most can agree on: Using alcohol as a teen, especially when "experimentation" crosses the line into binge drinking and other harmful behaviors, is not good.

A Grand Ronde Coalition recently held its first public meeting on Thursday, Oct. 12 in the Employee Service Building and was focused on that very issue. The Tribe has received a state grant, Partnership for Success, aimed at building a safe and healthy community, and raising awareness regarding alcohol use.

A coalition is a voluntary, formal agreement and collaboration between groups of community members. Meetings began a year ago. The mission is that through a "consistent and holistic" approach to education, culture, clear communication and healthy leadership, it can help the community.

"We wanted to open up these meetings," said Cristina Lara, Social Services Prevention coordinator. "We want to see how we can help and hear from our community and get the word out about negative and positive peer pressure."

The group's vision is for people in the Grand Ronde community to feel safe, have a sense of belonging and make positive contributions to one another.

"We want to live in a community bonded through healing," Lara said.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, excessive alcohol use led to approximately 88,000 deaths and 2.5 million years of potential life lost each year in the United States from 2006 to 2010, and was responsible for one in 10 deaths among working-age adults aged 20 to 64 years.

With these sobering statistics, one of the coalition's first tasks was to conduct a community health survey about attitudes toward alcohol use. Some of the findings include:

- Youth binge drinking is higher than the non-Native population, and the youth are less likely than their peers to say that binge drinking is risky. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, binge drinking is defined as five or more drinks within two hours for men, and four or more drinks for women. Most people younger than age 21 who drink report binge drinking usually do so on multiple occasions.
- Twenty-four percent of Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde eighth-graders and 33 percent of 11th-graders said that their family did not have clear rules about alcohol and drug use. Further, 81 percent of the 11th-graders and 40 percent of eighth-graders said alcohol was easy or very easy to obtain.
- 70 percent of online survey respondents and 50 percent of housing respondents said that underage drinking is common and not likely to change.



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

**Barry Larsen speaks during the Grand Ronde Coalition meeting in the Employee Service Building on Thursday, Oct. 12. In the background Sydney Clark, left, and Dorene Gillespie listen.**

• Regarding adult drinking habits, 87 percent online and 89 percent in housing said they did not drink and drive within the last 30 days, and approximately the same number abstained from binge drinking.

Carmen Mercier is a Tribal Elder, Vocational Rehabilitation caseworker and coalition member.

"Some parents haven't thought about their values around alcohol use," Mercier said. "It would be good to give the opportunity [for them] to explore what those are and share them with their kids."

According to its website, the Partnership for Success grant programs aim to reduce substance misuse and strengthen prevention at the state, Tribal and jurisdictional levels because alcohol is the most widely used addictive substance in Oregon and the United States.

The prevention piece is accomplished by helping grantees access state funding for prevention strategies, based on the premise that change begins at the community level, and that through collaboration states and communities of high need can overcome challenges associated with substance misuse.

"We realize that sometimes when you live (in a community) you don't quite see the effects of alcohol and addiction," Lara said. "We (the coalition) want to see how we can help get the word out about negative and positive peer pressure, being sober and how intergenerational trauma impacts (young people)."

Intergenerational trauma has been researched at length during the past decade. Bonnie Duran, director for Indigenous Health Research at the Indigenous Wellness Research Institute, says, "Many present-day health disparities can be traced back through epigenetics to a 'colonial health deficit,' the result of colonization and its aftermath."

A few of the public meeting attendees were in recovery. One said that when he was using, it was a huge challenge to talk to his son about staying away from drugs and alcohol because he "felt like a hypocrite."

"I didn't know how to address it,"

he said. "I felt like I didn't have any ground to stand on as a parent."

Lara said that helping parents and young people to better understand each other is important.

"Parents need to understand that it is OK to still say 'No' to their kids, and to let them know it is OK to say, 'I want better for you,'" she said. "Part of the vision for this group is to have a healed community ... to put strategies into place to help young people. Trauma will take a long time to heal. The idea is to figure out how to build a better foundation."

Other points brought up during the first public meeting included the struggle of communicating with people who are in the midst of addictions, and how to support without enabling them.

"As a human being, I can empathize with the experience of addiction ... we are all recovering from something," Lara said.

The coalition's next public meeting will be held at 4:30 p.m. Thursday, Nov. 16, at the Employee Service Building. Dinner will be provided. All ages are welcome. ■

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