

# Rationale for the Role of the Faith Community in the Prevention of Substance Abuse Problems

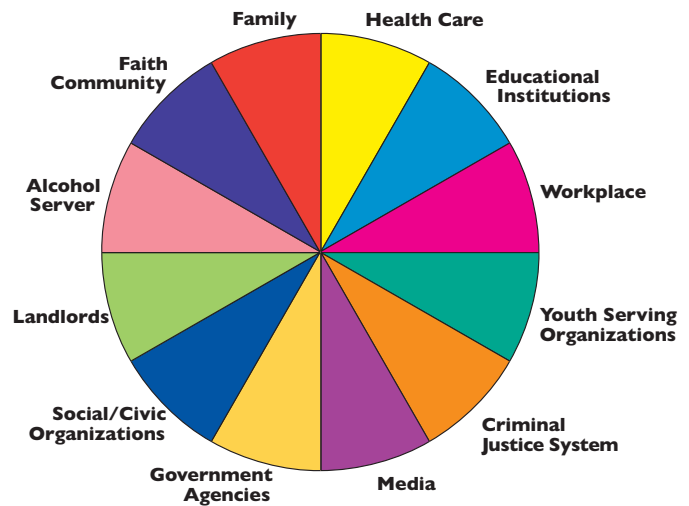
**PREVENTION RESEARCH** findings emphasize the importance of multiple efforts by many sectors of the community, targeting people of various ages, addressing both individuals and the broader community environment and sustaining efforts over time.

The context in which substance use occurs is complex. It involves an interconnected set of social influences such as public policy, family, friends, availability, religious beliefs and traditions and social norms as well as personal factors, including personality traits, biological/genetic characteristics and reasoning ability. Because of the complexity of these influences, planning efforts to prevent substance use and related problems must consider many social and personal factors in order to increase the likelihood that a particular prevention program will be effective.

Recent prevention strategies that demonstrate the most promise focus on change at multiple levels including the family, social groups, local communities and, more broadly, the society at large. This strategy advocates for changing the broader environment across the whole population and not simply targeting those deemed to be at highest risk for substance use and related problems. This perspective stresses the importance of examining the totality of sectors and including as many of them as possible to maximize the potential for success of prevention efforts.

Communities rarely have sectors working together in equal parts as illustrated in the circle. Many communities are missing some components. Some sectors are larger than others, and often they are disconnected from one another.

To maximize the potential of prevention efforts, it is important to identify all the potential sectors within a community and begin the process of working together toward a shared goal.



While substance abuse problems exist among the leadership and laity regardless of faith tradition or denomination, religion and spirituality can also provide protection from substance use and abuse. Eduardo Hernandez-Alarcon finds that, “there is a substantial body of research that demonstrates positive relationships of spirituality and religiosity on physical and behavior health... This research indicates that faith and spirituality can decrease risk factors and enhance protective factors for the avoidance of substance abuse problems.”

A considerable body of literature on the relationship of personal religiousness, spirituality and substance abuse exists. Relevant titles include: *The Handbook of Religion and Health*, (Koenig, et al, 2001); *So Help Me God: Substance Abuse, Religion and Spirituality* (The Center on Addiction

> > >

and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, 2001); *Spirituality, Faith-based and Community Programs: Implications for Substance Abuse Prevention* (Hernandez-Alarcon, Eduardo, Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, 2001); and *A Congregational Team Approach to Substance Abuse Prevention* (CSAP's Central Center for the Application of Prevention technology, Faith Partners and The Johnson Institute, 2003).

Some prevention professionals forge links with the faith community because they recognize the importance of faith and spirituality as deterrents to substance abuse. Faith institutions have the potential to touch a broader range of the community than many other sectors because they reach people of all ages, economic levels and ethnicities. Unfortunately, in some situations, however, the faith community has turned over responsibility for responding to alcohol and other drug use to schools, government agencies, law enforcement officials, health care providers or others.

Clearly, however, the faith community is capable of playing a key role in some important substance abuse prevention functions. Faith communities can:

- ▶ help individual members and our communities move beyond the old questions surrounding the moralistic wet/dry controversy and view substance use problems as more than simply medical concerns
- ▶ respond to new questions related to helping people develop personal guidelines that can help them make safe, legal and appropriate choices about substance use and nonuse.
- ▶ provide support for youth and families
- ▶ help members understand the spiritual dimensions of substance abuse problems and prevention
- ▶ work with other institutions and organizations within the community to design and implement community-based prevention efforts.

As communities engage in the process of forming cross-sector partnerships to support youth and families, religious institutions and their leadership need to be visible, present and active.

Community initiatives targeted at substance abuse prevention are enhanced when religious institutions both support the initiative and mobilize their own resources. Religious leaders should always be integrated into any gathering of community leaders. Coordinating prevention efforts with the faith community will reach audiences that would otherwise be excluded.

The effectiveness of any prevention approach within a given community depends on its context and role within an overall prevention plan. In order to understand the impact of a specific prevention strategy, we need to consider it within a broader context of prevention efforts in the community.

No entity in American society is in a more strategic position to assist in affecting positive, planned social change on the complex issue of substance use and attitudes than is the faith community. When the faith community is a nurturing, supportive one in which alcohol and other drug use issues and spiritual needs are addressed, problems can be identified and responded to, as well as prevented. Within this context, the faith community is called upon to establish an appropriate and essential role for responding to the immensely important and complex problem of preventing substance abuse problems.

*For complete citations to sources used in the development of this document, contact: Interfaith Center for Health Issues at [www.envrc.org](http://www.envrc.org).*

