

## YOUTH EMPOWERMENT AND POLICY PROJECT

### Origin and History of the Project

Funded by the Maine Office of Substance Abuse, the Youth Empowerment and Policy Project (YEPP) was established in 2001 with the primary goal of involving Maine's youth in the effort to decrease underage drinking. By gaining knowledge and understanding of current research and working with experts in the fields of substance abuse prevention, law enforcement and other key stakeholders, **the group works to change factors in the social, legal, economic and political environment that encourage, enable or support underage drinking.** An underlying philosophy of the project asserts that, because underage drinking is a problem affecting the youth population, the most effective way to analyze and improve the environment is to directly involve youth in the discussion.

YEPP is an active and diverse group of students from around the State of Maine. YEPP members incorporate their perspectives and experiences in the development and implementation of Findings and Recommendations about drug and alcohol policy and distribute these documents to groups throughout the state including schools, community organizations, parents, law enforcement agencies, to foster discussion on the community level and improve policies around the state.

Over the past several years the group has worked to produce and distribute the following findings and recommendations<sup>1</sup> aimed at reducing underage drinking.

***A Guide to Replicating an Alcohol Retailer's Marketing Code of Conduct in Your Local Community (2007)*** - this document is intended to help local, statewide, and national groups replicate an Alcohol Retailer's Marketing Code of Conduct. The code of conduct is a set of guidelines to help retailers make concrete changes in their stores to reduce the impact of alcohol advertising on underage youth.

***Alcohol Retailer's Local Marketing Code of Conduct (2006)*** – this document contains recommendations for local retailer alcohol marketing, its effects on under age drinking, and recommended forms and procedures to assist communities in making practical interventions are also included.

***Alcohol Advertising and Underage Drinking: A Youth Perspective (2005)*** – this document contains the results of the groups own independent statewide survey of 500 youth on the effects of alcohol advertising on underage youth and corresponding recommendations for change.

***Enforcement of Underage Drinking Laws (2004)*** – combined with the findings of their own research and gaining critical knowledge from a cross-section of experts in the field of law enforcement, the youth group prepared findings and recommendations to assist law enforcement agencies in strengthening enforcement policies and procedures. As a result of this document, youth were invited to work with the Maine Office of Substance Abuse and the State Attorney General's Office to develop a model law enforcement policy, which was adopted by the Maine Police Chiefs' Association in 2005.

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<sup>1</sup> All of the project's findings and recommendations are available on-line at the Youth Empowerment and Policy Web Site, which can be found at [www.neias.org/YEP/](http://www.neias.org/YEP/)

**School Athletic Policy** (2002) – this document contains findings and recommendations to assist school policy makers in strengthening and enforcing school alcohol and drug policy for student athletes. It compliments the group’s previous work in general school alcohol and drug policy.

**General School Policy** (2001) – this document contains findings and recommendations of the groups work related to school-wide alcohol and drug policy.

## **Program Goals**

YEPP’s primary goal is to change factors in the social, legal, economic and political environment that encourage, enable or support underage drinking. YEPP uses policy, enforcement and community strategies, including media focused strategies, to positively affect risk and protective factors in three domains: the individual, the community and the society/environment.

Research indicates that youth are exposed to a number of factors which may either increase their risk for, or protect them from, problems such as abusing drugs or engaging in delinquent behavior<sup>2</sup>, hence the use of the terminology “risk factors” and “protective factors”.

*“Risk factors” are any circumstances that may increase youths’ likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors. Conversely, “protective factors” are any circumstances that promote healthy youth behaviors and decrease the chance that youth will engage in risky behaviors.*

*Risk factors and protective factors are often organized into five categories: Individual, Family, School, Peer Group, and Community.”<sup>3</sup>*

## **Work Format**

A typical year of work on the Youth Empowerment and Policy Project accomplishes change through the following five steps:

**Step 1** *Convene a group* of youths from across the state.

**Step 2** Youths *pick a policy issue* to work on relevant to substance abuse prevention.

**Step 3** Youths *conduct research*, either by designing their own data collection efforts or by consulting with experts in relevant fields to provide an educated perspective.

**Step 4** Based on research, youths *create Findings and Recommendations* on the chosen topic.

**Step 5** The group works to *disseminate the information* on the local level so communities can “take up” the actions suggested within the Findings and Recommendations.

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<sup>2</sup> Helping America’s Youth, Introduction to Risk Factors and Protective Factors. <http://guide.helpingamericasyouth.gov/programtool-factors.cfm>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.