



Partners Work Together to Solve a Communitywide Alcohol Problem: Free To Grow in Wausau, Wis.

Free To Grow brought together diverse community partners to help strengthen families and communities. At one site, Wausau, Wis., the partners worked to change social norms on alcohol use and abuse.

Taverns are a common site in Wausau; it has 84 of them for a population of about 40,000. Before *Free To Grow*, the local Head Start agency and other Wausau organizations, including the police, schools and a substance abuse treatment provider, Premier Recovery Services, dealt with alcohol abuse one person at a time.

Through the partnerships established by *Free To Grow*, these and other organizations began to view tolerance for alcohol abuse as a communitywide problem that could be solved through collaborative action.

"Our *Free To Grow* partnerships sent the message that this was a community process, that it wasn't the work of any one organization or agency," said Catherine E. Howethwaits, executive director and Head Start director at the [Marathon County Child Development Agency](#), which coordinated the *Free To Grow* project.

Other key partners on the *Free To Grow* governing board included the Marathon County Health Department, Marathon County Department of Social Services and Children's Service Society of Wisconsin's Start Right Program.

Meeting at least monthly, the governing board helped develop a strategic plan to address local alcohol abuse and then tracked the project's progress, assessing successes and challenges and revising the plan as necessary. The partner organizations also helped raise matching funds and provided fiscal oversight for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation grant that funded *Free To Grow*.

The neighborhoods surrounding Wausau's center city—a high-crime area defined by the four elementary school districts with a majority of the city's Head Start families—was the target area of the *Free To Grow* project. However, some of the strategies encompassed the entire city, not just that one section.

Changing Social Norms

The *Free To Grow* partners established a workgroup to focus on alcohol-related policy. The group—named Building Responsible Alcohol Values and Options and known by the acronym BRAVO—served as the agent for public awareness campaigns aimed at changing social norms on alcohol use. Chief of Police Bill Brandimore helped develop messages for the campaigns and served as a spokesperson.

One campaign used messages on posters and billboards to counter a widespread local perception that all Wausau teenagers drank—a perception shown not to be true by a survey conducted as part of the *Free To Grow* project. The campaign focused on three messages based on the survey results:

- "More than half of Wausau area teens have never tried alcohol."
- "96 percent of Wausau area teens don't drink alcohol when they hang out with their friends."
- "Wausau area teens think that most teens drink alcohol, the truth is 75 percent don't drink."