

NORTHWEST + CENTRAL VT PREVENTION NETWORK

MEETING NOTES

June 11th, 2026

10:00 – 11:30am

Meeting Goal

Providing an opportunity for people and organizations across Northwest and Central Vermont to come together to share information, make connections, and explore opportunities related to prevention of substance misuse and promoting wellbeing in our communities.

Welcome & Agenda Overview

Agenda:

Welcome/Intros, No Prevention Partner Updates

Agenda Review/Background: Amy Carmola, Chief Impact Officer at United Way of Northwest VT

Alcohol Policy Update: Marielle Matthews (Policy and Grants Manager at Winooski Partnership for Prevention) and Megan Stearns (Chief Creative Officer at C'est la VT)

Group Discussion

Wrap up/Next Steps

Agenda Review/Background

Alcohol Policy Project came out of the 2025 summit, deemed “essential” by prevention partners across the region

Priority of advancing alcohol policy change/development, building on the work done by Winooski Partnership for Prevention (WPP)

Two priorities: communications and how to organize a campaign

Contracted with Megan Stearns and Suzanne Graham to define the opportunity, identify what's needed and what's possible, and how to move forward

The Prevention Funding Committee made a commitment to support this work, invested in a portfolio and had additional dollars to support initiatives and priorities defined by the region

Engaging with the other Vermont Prevention Lead Organizations (VPLOs) to see what we can do together to develop a statewide capacity to move this forward (awareness and engagement)

Alcohol Policy Update

Slides from Marielle's presentation are attached to the email!

Increase tax from 0.02/drink to anything higher! Public doesn't want to hear “you should drink less,” important to tell people where the money is going, people generally do not like to give the government money. Glow up! Doubling the tax would decrease the all-cause alcohol mortality by 35% (nationally)

Cost per drink is about \$2.49, including healthcare costs, productivity, injury, Medicaid, law enforcement SOCIAL COST. If drink is \$15, additional \$2.49 of taxpayer dollars



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Labeling improvements: what is everyone exposed to? Less than 50% of the population knows that alcohol causes cancer. Mouth, throat, breast, stomach, colorectal cancers. Standard drinks – proxy for ABV, 0.6fl oz of pure ethanol. Most packages have more than one standard drink. Servers are required to know, not sure that's true. Nutrition would include calories (see slide with demo label)

Social media effects? Dead last as an educational tool when caregivers were surveyed (Eva, Central Vermont Prevention Coalition)

Closer to influencing behavior (second tier of the pyramid), campaigns would not work if social media didn't work

Education costs a lot of money, if we aren't funding prevention with taxes, we don't have the funds or capacity to educate.

Other presentation (Megan Stearns) → findings from focus groups in Rutland, Hartford, Burlington, Lyndonville

- 47 participants total, ages 18-80, different ethnicities, genders, political leanings, occupations
- Answers were fairly consistent. Findings of focus groups are qualitative, not scientific. Polling will have scientific findings

Substance misuse as a term came across as a little judgmental

Do people know that VT has a significant problem with alcohol? Alcohol on average was a 6.9

Burlington participants scored prescription opioids, heroin and fentanyl esp. high

911 dispatcher in Hartford gave alc a 10 because she gets the most calls around alcohol

VDH: alc most misused substance in VT

Very alarmed by the number of deaths and the rise in deaths and underage drinking (12 year olds), did not know we had such a problem

Greatest awareness of cancer link in Burlington participants

Lyndonville group was given additional graphics and did not argue with the findings. All other groups were skeptical

Groups did not think anyone would look at the labels for cancer, but they did want to see nutrition labels

People need to be given data

Do people understand what it's like to recover from Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD)? Lyndonville gave it a 9.5, was the highest one.

How many of you are aware of the process of recovering from AUD? Only 2-3/47 had an in depth understanding. Many people were saddened, how does anyone afford or accomplish this?

Emotional intersection to put human faces to the problem.

Given a list of words to describe the problem, no one shied away from any of them, people did want to change their previous answers (0-10)



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Alcohol ads! People did not understand the Heineken ad, but didn't like the "drink responsibly".
Thought the corona ad was very effective
Seeing ads made people feel disgusted and manipulated, but the ads work. Need ad campaigns like we do for smoking, want to use scare tactics
Messaging: "Nationally, new surveys..." was the most popular one, 2nd was "excessive alcohol use costs Vermont...", "The alcohol industry..." was 3rd but don't mention HHS/anything related to RFK Jr. 5th was "from its craft breweries..."
Take power away from big alcohol, give people the info they need to make better decisions
Campaign names: evenly split, drink different was the most different. "What's in this drink" made people think of roofies

Group Discussion around how to get people excited about labels and tax

Notes below are summarized from the three breakout groups:

How do we get people excited about labels?

Sticker campaign in Rutland. Volunteers put stickers on alcohol that said pregnancy risk etc. not sure if there was any follow up on whether it was effective

Vermonters deserve the same transparency about alcohol that they already receive about food, tapping into that? Consumers currently receive far less health information about alcohol than they do about soda, cereal, or yogurt. Campaign to label salt/fat on food, food industry did campaign on fat-shaming to affect public opinion. The way that the industry will respond.

Potential bottle messaging:

- something about "Right to Know."
- capitalizing on "Informed Consumer Choice."
- Lean into "Transparency, Not Prohibition."
- "If it's in the bottle, Vermonters should know about it."

Emphasizing mental health services in schools and AUD treatment to get buy-in.

Cancer-causing education – who knew? About 50% that knows. Why not making it about living, about not getting sick. "Did you know" campaign.

Needs to have the same quality as alcohol advertisements

Campaign name won't appeal to all groups, campaign is about policy change, not about getting people to change their behaviors. Cannot be preachy. The 20-year olds in the focus groups could talk about why they don't drink in a way that's not preachy.



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How do we get people excited and on board with a tax?

Holding the sellers accountable instead of the buyers is easier to get on board with (non-consumer approach)

Upending and undoing of civil rights laws including voting rights act. Vermont Racial Justice Alliance proposed a bill and proposed to pay for it (including alcohol tax) to reinforce/introduce. Hey what if we tax alcohol for democracy:

<https://legislature.vermont.gov/Documents/2026/Docs/BILLS/S-0301/S-0301%20As%20Introduced.pdf> (page 15)

Support will come from where the funding is used and from building a sense of anger around the problem and providing a solution. We can partner it with a tax that Vermonters pay and aren't happy about it.

- Winooski was using alcohol tax as a way to relieve the education tax which is how we arrived at SAPs. Winooski had an event where they gave people fake money and asked how they would like the money to be spent within government infrastructure.
- People do not like property tax and are very angry about it. Making living and housing unsustainable.
- Conversation around mental health issues (40-50 million of the 2.2 billion education fund), is that appropriately coming from the education tax or should it come from the general fund? Could garner some support there if the conversation is around health/mental health in schools.
- This is a way to address the larger issue (mental health and substance misuse) but separate from the agency of education stuff where we don't know where any of the money is going or if it's getting used effectively.

Campaign! Needs broad support going into the legislative session. The bill this year got a number of cosponsors but no action.

Potential slogans?

- "Alcohol harms have real costs."
- "Price matters."
- "Protect youth."
- "Invest in prevention."
- "Pay a little now or pay more later."

Partnering with breweries or other untapped partners (those that may be opposed). Connection with craft breweries closing, interesting to prioritize those who have made the jump to nonalcoholic beverages. Switchback now does it in house instead of sending it to other places. Could do an education event with a brewery where some amount (ex. A dime per dollar) from



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each sale is put towards prevention. Would have to be careful that this doesn't incentivize people to drink though.

Scott is very pro-small business. VT has not increased alcohol tax in 20 years, was reduced during COVID, and ready to drink cocktails allowed to be sold in grocery stores, and alcohol delivers.

Amplify the voices of 20-something year olds who aren't drinking. They are the change we're already seeing. Give them a microphone. "Cost of drink is keeping me from going to bars. I'll drink at home." Young people say "I don't have money to spend on alcohol" – one drink is like minimum wage. Putting a \$\$ value to a drink is persuasive – is it worth it?

Tax increase isn't about the money raised, it's about the behavior change that happens.

Lack of accountability – consequences – in our country. Alcohol companies make money based on the suffering of the people who buy their product. No one should be above the law. They have to pay for the solution, as part of it. Tax – and put the money back into our community.

Wrap up/Next Steps

Prevention partner updates will be sent out.

