

THE SALVATION ARMY AUSTRALIA EASTERN TERRITORY

SUBMISSION TO NSW GOVERNMENT ALCOHOL SUMMIT

With the support of the Council of Churches in New South Wales representing the Anglican Church (Diocese of Sydney), the Baptist Union of New South Wales, the Christian Reformed Churches NSW Classis, the Churches of Christ in NSW, the Fellowship of Congregational Churches and the Presbyterian Church, NSW Synod.

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Introduction

Australia has strong cultural and historical links to the use of alcohol. From early colonial days (when rum was used as currency), to the traditional backyard barbeque, through to the current crop of boutique beverages aimed at the younger palate, alcohol has played a major role in the Australian community for over 200 years.

Australians use alcohol for a variety of reasons and in a variety of settings. It is used to socialise, to relax, to grieve and to celebrate. Alcohol, however, has the potential to cause a high level of harm to individuals, families and to the wider community, particularly those who are vulnerable, such as young people and the disadvantaged.

The cost in economic, health, social, family and legal terms to the community is enormous. There is a huge economic cost to the community caused by the use of alcohol. This includes but is not limited to stroke, liver cirrhosis, suicide, premature death from motor vehicle accidents and violence.

Additionally alcohol has been related, in a number of cases, to sexual assault, domestic violence, unplanned pregnancies, the breakdown of marriages and the break up of families.

In light of the harm to individuals and the community as a whole, The Salvation Army makes the following observations and recommendations.

Legal Age

The Salvation Army is concerned that the age at which the youth of Australia is legally permitted to purchase and consume alcoholic beverages – 18 years of age – is too young.

Recent research conducted by Roy Morgan Research for The Salvation Army showed that binge drinking amongst young males and females had reached epidemic proportions.

In fact, 35% of males aged between 14 and 19 admitted to drinking between 11 and 30 alcoholic drinks in one session and 22% of females in the same age group reported drinking between 9 and 30 drinks.

In the 20 to 24 year age group 54% of males and 19% of females reported binge drinking.

Additionally, the research showed that the age at which children start to drink is now less than 14 years of age. In fact, 63% had had their first drink by the age of 14 (14% by the age of 11). This compares with 9% of people now over 65 who had their first drink by the age of 14. This shows a dramatic shift in the drinking patterns of the Australian community.

The National Minimum Drinking Age Act in the United States of America, enacted in 1984, brought into being Federal legislation raising the age of legal purchase of alcohol to 21 years of age in all States.

The Salvation Army calls on the NSW Government to consider raising the age at which alcohol can be legally purchased and consumed to 21 years of age.

Regulatory controls on advertising

The Salvation Army is concerned that the current methods of advertising alcohol products does not do enough to make consumers aware, or to warn, of the potential of the product to cause negative impacts on individuals, families and the community.

Celebrities & sporting figures

Additionally, the use of sporting or high profile public figures in alcohol advertising sends the wrong message to young people, as do the messages contained in alcohol advertisements relating to the mood-changing potential of alcohol beverages. Messages that suggest alcohol use can reduce stress, take away negative emotions and bring about positive feelings provide a one-dimensional view of the effects of alcohol. In fact it could be argued that alcohol advertising openly promotes a strong link between alcohol consumption and the ability to “have a good time”.

Alcoholic ‘soft’ drinks

A further concern is the advent and advertising of “soft” alcoholic beverages - that is, alcoholic beverages that are sweetened and coloured, aimed particularly at younger people. There is little difference in taste, presentation and packaging of these drinks to soft drinks. In fact it could be argued these drinks are marketed with this in mind.

Regulatory controls on tobacco

Advertising of alcohol products is not subject to the same regulatory controls as tobacco products. These regulations were brought into being as a response to the increasing negative health and economic costs of the use tobacco products.

The Salvation Army calls on the NSW Government to give consideration to the regulation of the advertising of alcohol products.

Information & health warnings

The Salvation Army is concerned that there is not enough information available to consumers of alcohol beverages on the harmful impacts to general health and wellbeing caused by excessive and / or prolonged use of alcohol.

Health warnings on tobacco products have been implemented as an intervention and public education strategy, aimed at lessening the harmful effects of tobacco on the community, alcohol should be subject to the same health considerations.

The Salvation Army calls on the NSW Government to give consideration to the introduction of health warnings on all alcoholic beverages.

Young people

The Salvation Army is concerned that the negative impact of alcohol use on young people is worsening. There is recognition by Government that alcohol has a much greater negative effect on young people. This is due to a variety of reasons, such as inexperience with alcohol use, a general lack of maturity and the physiological development still taking place in the bodies of young people.

The Salvation Army calls on the NSW Government to commit increased and significant resources towards conducting targeted education and communication campaigns for young people about the negative health effects of alcohol.

Drink driving

The Government has put strategies in place in an attempt to limit the negative impact of alcohol consumption – one in particular was the lowering of the prescribed concentration of alcohol in the blood stream permitted to drivers under the age 25, who have held a licence for less than three years, to 0.02 % BAL. The rest of the driving community are permitted up to 0.05 % BAL.

The Salvation Army calls on the NSW Government to give consideration to implementing legislation to reduce the limit for prescribed concentration of alcohol in the blood stream 0.02% BAL for all drivers, with the eventual goal of 0.00%.

Responsible Supply and Consumption

The Salvation Army would support the enforcement of the current guidelines for the serving of alcohol. This would mean that management and staff of places serving alcohol have a responsibility to carry out those guidelines within the meaning of the law and that failure to do so will result in follow up by law enforcement agencies.

Conclusion

The Salvation Army calls on the NSW Government to consider a multi-faceted response to the increasing problem of alcohol abuse in our community, including:

- raising the legal age for purchasing alcohol to 21 years
- introducing regulatory controls on advertising, especially in terms of endorsement by celebrities/ sporting personalities and promotion of 'soft' alcoholic beverages to young people
- committing increased resources towards targeted education and communication campaigns among young people about the dangers
- introduction of health warnings on alcohol products and better provision of information/ education about the negative health effects
- reducing the blood alcohol limit to 0.02% for everyone (not just under 25s), with the eventual aim of reducing it to zero.

The Salvation Army recognises that the problems caused by the misuse of alcohol are a community wide responsibility and commits itself to working with the Government, Non Government and Community Sectors to reduce the harm and negative impact cause to individuals, families and the community.

Thus creating a better and healthier society for all.

REFERENCE SOURCES:

- The National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2001.
- Alcohol Awareness Survey – Conducted on behalf of The Salvation Army by Roy Morgan Research 14th / 15th August 2002.
- Roads and Traffic Authority of NSW website.
- Australia and New Zealand Journal of Public Health 2001, Vol 25.