



LIGHTHOUSE NOW

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Health advocate says public policy changes key in battling booze abuse

by Keith Corcoran

BRIDGEWATER - Health and law enforcement officials appeared before Municipality of Lunenburg councillors last week to highlight the ongoing impacts of alcohol abuse and to turn the discussion toward changing rules to create healthier conditions for the next generation.

"Public policy and regulation of advertising, price and availability - we know those are the big targets," Todd Leader, South Shore Health's community health services director, said. "Those are the things that will make permanent change in our culture. The challenge is to sit down and talk about, at the municipal level, what power do we have, what kinds of ideas can we come up with, what things can we change, and you need a variety of perspectives in order to achieve that."

Mr. Leader and Bridgewater Police Chief John Collyer are part of a committee building on the 2011 report titled "In Our Words: What Alcohol Use in Bridgewater Looks Like," which examined alcohol use in Bridgewater and pointed to children and youth as bearing the brunt of the harms.

"If we can get our municipal leadership to understand the extent of the problem - and they do get it - I think that they have a means through their powers to change some of the culture here locally," Chief Collyer said.

It's been his experience that booze tends to be at the root cause of social disorder issues, violence and criminal acts that police deal with. A disturbing trend, he indicated, is the occurrences of mixing of alcohol with prescription medication.

Mr. Leader said the 18 to 25 age group is shown to be most heavily into binge drinking and unsafe levels of alcohol consumption. That age bracket, he indicated, is

wrapped up in the cultural perception that that sort of behaviour is normal.

"It's not about taking any individual case and saying, 'Well this person might have an addiction, we should provide treatment.' It's too late then. What we need to be doing is saying, for the next generation, for the kids who are in elementary school and junior high now, what can we change so that by the time they get to that age they see alcohol and their role with it in a different way."

It's not about prohibition, he pointed out, it's about making moderate consumption the new normal. Beyond that, it's about long-term change.

"Public policy is the single most impactful tool we have to affect the consumption and the type of consumption of alcohol," Mr. Leader said, "particularly among our youth."

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