

Educating on the consequences of alcohol

Written by By Molly Ann Howell Managing Editor
Friday, 02 June 2023 04:55



Gallup Alcohol Policy Alliance holds informational, strategic meeting

Gallup and McKinley County have a well-known alcohol problem. The *Sun* reports weekly on DWIs, with some offenders having seven, eight, or even nine offenses.

Across New Mexico, an average of five people died every day of alcohol-related causes in 2020.

The Gallup Alcohol Policy Alliance has debated the alcohol problem and strategizing ways to improve it since 2016. Now they're bringing the public into the discussion by hosting a "Community Conversation" event May 23 at the El Morro Events Center.

Dr. Jenny Wei, a local doctor who is board-certified in addiction, facilitated the discussion. In an interview with the *Sun*, she explained why she wanted to educate the community on the risks of alcohol.

"I think it's impossible to ignore that New Mexico has the highest rate of alcohol-related deaths and McKinley County is the county with the highest rates, even multiple times higher than the state overall. We see those in our local hospitals, and it's impossible to ignore the problem," Wei said.

New Mexico Department of Health Alcohol Epidemiologist Garry Kelley began the event by sharing information about alcohol and how it affects McKinley County.

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When it comes to alcohol-related deaths, the NMDOH divides the statistics into two categories: acute and chronic. Chronic deaths include cancers or other long-term diseases caused by excessive alcohol use, while acute is defined as things that happen suddenly, such as car accidents caused by drunk driving.

McKinley County's chronic deaths are three times higher than the rest of New Mexico and acute cases are two times higher.

Part of the discussion at the meeting focused on the strategies McKinley County could use to help prevent alcohol-related deaths. Kelley provided some examples of what has worked for other municipalities across the nation. His suggestions included increasing the alcohol tax, regulating how many outlets can sell alcohol in the county, keeping restaurants and bars accountable if any of their patrons get into accidents after drinking at their establishment, and enforcing age restriction on alcohol consumption.

Kelley also reminded everyone at the meeting of New Mexico's current liquor laws. The state gives local governments the authority when it comes to alcohol license zoning. It also limits the days and times alcohol can be sold.

In May 2021, a law was changed in Gallup to bring the county up to par with the state laws. The law changed so that alcohol is now sold in Gallup on Sundays, except for between the hours of 7 am to 9:59 am.

As for liquor licenses, Gallup does have a problem. The city currently has 30 active liquor licenses, and the state liquor board recommends Gallup have only 11. To compare, the liquor board recommends 282 licenses for Albuquerque, and it currently has 387.

WHO'S TO BLAME?

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A large part of the discussion during the meeting focused on who was to blame for the city and county's major alcohol problem.

One attendee said the city and county shouldn't put blame on the restaurants and stores that sell alcohol, but rather on bootleggers who sell the product illegally.

"We can't place 99.9% of the blame on our establishments when we have bootleggers on the streets who are selling [alcohol], and they're not licensed," she said.

As a local business owner, Sammy Chioda agreed that the problem doesn't stem from the city's restaurants. He explained that he holds ongoing classes for his staff at Sammy C's Pub & Grille on how to sell alcohol responsibly.

"We're not on a mission to get you drunk," Chioda said.

Chioda also said he doesn't blame anyone specific for the problems in Gallup. He more so blames the system.

He shared a story about a friend of his who died in Albuquerque in a drunk driving accident. A man who had been told by a Chavez County judge that he wasn't allowed to leave Roswell because of his multiple DWI charges. Shortly after receiving that sentence, the man made the three-hour drive to Albuquerque, crashing into Chioda's friend, killing him.

Chioda brought that story up to point out that many people who have been charged with multiple DWIs often get off on technicalities, such as the cop didn't show up to court that day.

Wei argued that the alcohol problem is not something that can just be fixed by the courts or the police.

“If [people] think it’s [a police problem], they’re going to think they don’t have to do anything about it,” Wei said.

LIQUOR TAX

One of the suggestions Kelley presented was for the state to increase alcohol taxes.

During the recent legislative session, HB 230 passed the House and Senate. It set a flat 25 cent tax per serving. Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham ultimately vetoed the increase.

Currently, the state beer excise tax is \$0.41 per gallon, distilled spirits are about \$6 per gallon, and wine excise taxes are \$1.70.

Wei and Gallup’s Behavioral Health Investment Zone Manager Debra Martinez said they plan to continue to fight for an increase in the next legislative session. Martinez noted that even an .01 cent increase would bring in millions of dollars for the state.

One component missing in the “Community Conversation” was a presentation from representatives of the New Mexico Special Investigations Unit and Alcohol Beverage Control Division about enforcement efforts and liquor licensing. Since no representative was able to attend the meeting, Wei and Martinez said that another meeting would be scheduled in the future for that presentation, although no date has been set.

By Molly Ann Howell
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