

# Promoting Health and Safety in the LGBT Community

## A Component of Vitality San Diego

### *Introduction*

Research confirms what many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) people already know: the LGBT population is disproportionately harmed by the adverse consequences of alcohol, tobacco and other drug use. The significant cost of substance abuse in the community is compounded by stress associated with coming out; prevalence of drug- and alcohol-based socialization; targeted marketing campaigns by alcohol and tobacco companies; and the link between substance abuse and unsafe sexual practices.

San Diego's LGBT community has a vital interest in adopting safe, responsible policies and practices with regard to alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. Under contract with the San Diego County Health and Human Services Agency, the Institute for Public Strategies (IPS) seeks to advance such policies and practices in the central city through a project called Vitality San Diego, one component of which focuses on the LGBT community.

A Vitality San Diego LGBT Advisory Group representing community members and organizations, health experts, government agencies and others has met periodically in 2001 to develop the project's goals. Some policies and strategies supported by the LGBT Advisory Group are detailed in this briefing, following a broad assessment of the alcohol and drug environment in the community.

### *The Current Environment: Alcohol*

The role of bars in the social and political life of the LGBT community can be traced back far beyond the pivotal riots at New York's Stonewall Inn in 1969. For many years bars and nightclubs offered some of the only environments for LGBT people to congregate. Though opportunities to socialize have grown dramatically since then, LGBT bars continue to provide important venues for recreation, communication and fundraising.

But the effects of alcohol abuse also remain closely associated with the community. Gay men and lesbians report alcohol problems at a rate about twice that of the heterosexual population, and drinking trends continue into older age among gays and lesbians more than among the rest of the population.

Alcohol-related health problems take a heavy toll in the LGBT community, including relationship violence, impaired judgment leading to greater risk for the HIV virus and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), addiction and clinical depression. In one recent study, young gay men who reported having unprotected sex drank more than those who practiced safer sex. Men in the same study were much more likely to have unsafe sex with non-steady sexual partners after drinking than when sober. Similar trends are believed to be true for STD transmission among lesbian and bisexual women: experts cite alcohol and drug use as a risk factor for the hundreds of new HIV and STD infections in San Diego county every year.

Alcohol interests take full advantage of the LGBT population's patterns of alcohol use. Alcohol producers and retailers market themselves heavily in LGBT bars and publications with carefully targeted ad campaigns. And they also sign high-profile sponsorship deals with LGBT agencies and organizations, promoting alcohol brands by association with organizations that exist to promote the community's health. Hillcrest alone — San Diego's most identifiable LGBT neighborhood — is home to 131 retail alcohol outlets. According to the Department

of Alcohol Beverage Control, which licenses alcohol outlets, that's more than twice the number recommended for health and safety based on population density.

### ***Other Drug Use***

In addition to markedly higher alcohol-related problems, research shows that illicit drug use is also especially widespread among LGBT people. Among these substances are “party drugs” or “club drugs” — such as ecstasy, crystal methamphetamine, GHB and ketamine — that are commonly connected to dance clubs and circuit-party-style events. In addition to the short- and long-term health hazards such drugs pose, they can also lead to diseases transmitted by unsafe sex. Methamphetamines and inhalants, for example, are often used as sexual stimulants. And many LGBT people who report having had unsafe sex say alcohol and other drugs were a factor.

One of the most harmful substances used in the LGBT community is also the easiest to obtain: tobacco. Cigarette smoking is the main high-risk behavior associated with the leading chronic diseases in America, and evidence shows that gay men and lesbians smoke at rates dramatically exceeding that of the general population. Tobacco companies have learned to capitalize on this heavy share of the market, aggressively pushing their products within the LGBT community.

### ***Coming Out and the Youth Factor***

Growing up LGBT in itself can be full of loneliness, stress and fear. For some people who are LGBT or uncertain of their sexuality, drugs and alcohol are used to overcome and deal with (or not deal with) confusion, low self-esteem and shame. This can be especially true among LGBT youth, for whom alcohol and drug use is often perceived as an entrée into LGBT culture.

In a study recently published in the *American Journal of Public Health*, youths who reported a same-sex orientation were more than twice as likely as their heterosexual peers to have attempted or contemplated suicide. The same study identified alcohol abuse as a disproportionately high suicide risk factor for gay and lesbian youths, noting that “for gay and lesbian youths who are concealing their sexual identities, alcohol may be used to numb the related anxiety and depression.”

Substance-abuse prevention efforts among LGBT and questioning youths play a critical role in averting related physical and emotional health risks. Policies and practices in the environment young people grow into will ultimately shape the future well-being of the community.

### ***Policy Goals***

Vitality San Diego encourages community members to work with LGBT businesses and other organizations to adopt responsible alcohol and other drug policies. By promoting health and safety as part of a community-wide effort, businesses and other agencies can be socially responsible *and* economically viable.

Despite impressions to the contrary — often fueled by advertising media coverage — alcohol and drug use does not define the social range of the LGBT community. Measures should be taken to counteract these misperceptions about LGBT life in San Diego, as well as reinforce a vital and healthy LGBT community. Ideas include creating and supporting alcohol-safe and drug-free opportunities for the LGBT community, especially for young people who are coming out. Shifting perceptions of the community's social norms also requires improving communication and media coverage to more accurately reflect the social norms of local LGBT life.

Potential actions for consideration by members of San Diego's LGBT community include:

- Responsible alcohol and drug policies and practices at alcohol venues
- Responsible alcohol sponsorship
- Alcohol-safe and drug-free nights and events in various commercial and social settings
- Reduced alcohol license density in Hillcrest and North Park
- Responsible alcohol advertising

### ***Strategies***

The Vitality San Diego LGBT Advisory Group recommends the following efforts to promote health and safety in the community:

- Training of community members in media advocacy, community organizing and policy development so they can assess and abate the risks in their community. These community members will work with business owners and managers and law-enforcement agencies to monitor and enforce the laws related to underage access and service as well as service to intoxicated persons.
- Collaborating with community agencies and community members to form a coalition to prevent alcohol- and drug-related unsafe sexual practices by changing the community environment and community norms.
- Training community members to do risk assessments at bars, off-sale alcohol outlets and special events.
- Improving coverage in the LGBT media to reflect the social norms of the community more accurately.

### ***Getting Involved***

All LGBT people and their allies have a role to play in promoting the health and safety of their community. Among the organizations that have participated in the LGBT Advisory Group are the City Council District Three Office, the Responsible Hospitality Coalition, North Park Family Health Centers, the county Office of AIDS Coordination, the San Diego Police Department, and Stepping Stone. To learn more about Vitality San Diego or to get involved, contact Rob Adsit at (619) 474-8844, ext. 16, or e-mail [radsit@publicstrategies.org](mailto:radsit@publicstrategies.org). For other Vitality San Diego issue briefings — including the overall, East Village and North Park briefings — visit [www.publicstrategies.org/vitality\\_sandiego](http://www.publicstrategies.org/vitality_sandiego).