

# How do Public Policy and The People Affect Prevention?

By Bridget Ingebrigtsen

There was a time when you could smoke everywhere – in restaurants, offices, even on airplanes. But, when research showed the link between smoking and lung cancer, the world began to change. Workplaces started banning smoking within their buildings. Then, municipalities started banning smoking in public places. And, after seeing the success of smoking bans in its towns, Illinois adopted the Smoke-Free Illinois Act, which bans smoking in all public buildings within the state.

“When you think about the evolution of smoking over the past 100 years, you can see why public policy is so important,” says Sara Moscato Howe, CEO of the Illinois Alcohol and Drug Dependence Association (IADDA). “Because of the public policies that were set over the years, we have changed the way smoking is viewed in social settings. And, just think about all the people who don’t have to breathe in secondhand smoke now. That is how public policy works with prevention.”

Public policy, as defined by the Bureau of Community-based and Primary Prevention’s Substance Abuse Prevention Program, includes “institutional or organizational policies, practices and procedures that affect or regulate the sale, use, consumption, promotion or consequences of the use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs (ATOD). It not only includes laws and ordinances but also the policies and practices of schools, law enforcement and other organizations and businesses. And it also includes the degree to which the public policy is being enforced.”

While preventionists hope to reach people through education and outreach, public policy impacts the entire community. “What public policy does is it sets a community’s norms and standards,” Howe says. “I would use a seatbelt as an example. Some people know to put on their seatbelts because it’s the safe thing to do. Then, there are others who wouldn’t put their seatbelts on if there wasn’t a law. But, they put their seatbelts on because they want to be law-abiding citizens.”

IADDA is one of many prevention organizations in Illinois that lobbies for laws that enable citizens to live healthy, drug-free and alcohol-free lives. “Our roots are in public policy,”

Howe says. Most recently, the organization lobbied in favor of the alcopop advertising law that was passed in Illinois, as well as supported the Second Chance Act that was passed on the federal level. Currently, the organization is lobbying for a bill in Illinois that would require the makers of alcoholic energy drinks to clearly mark “6 percent alcohol by volume,” so these drinks are not inadvertently sold to minors. IADDA also lobbies regularly for prevention funding, she says.



## Eliminating the Temptations

The Illinois Church Action on Alcohol and Addiction Problems (ILCAAAP) is another organization that monitors public policy as a way to protect its constituents. ILCAAAP is a statewide, nonprofit organization dedicated to preventing problems caused by alcohol, other drugs and gambling. The organization watches policies on many levels, from local school policies to state and federal legislation. “We are a voice for the church,” says Anita Bedell, executive director of the ILCAAAP. “Churches are always looking at legislation that will impact the community. Churches cannot campaign in favor of candidates, but they can encourage people to speak out on the issues.”

Bedell says she views public policy as a way to “make drugs, alcohol and tobacco less accessible to the public so that they will be less enticing.” A powerful example of how limiting accessibility to drugs can affect prevention was illustrated in a recent news release from the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy. It showed that state and federal laws, as well as tighter international chemical controls, have made it more difficult for meth producers to obtain the precursor chemicals they need to make the drug. Domestic meth lab incidents have dropped by more than 70 percent since 2004, while seizures of meth along the U.S. - Mexico border are down 32 percent from 2006.

Several issues that the organization are lobbying for include the restriction of Internet gambling in Illinois, as well as opposing the use of medical marijuana, Bedell says.

## Laws and Their Impact on Drunk Driving

Public policy has a tremendous impact in the area of drunk driving, explains Charlene Chapman, executive director of the Alliance Against Intoxicated Motorists (AAIM), an independent, nonprofit organization founded in 1982 by families who lost loved ones in drunk driving crashes. AAIM was Illinois’ first citizen action group dedicated to the fight to prevent driving under the influence.

Chapman says laws have to be tough with regard to drunk driving because it is viewed as a “special crime, so to speak, since drinking is viewed as being socially acceptable.” She says that although laws are tough in Illinois, one challenge the group continues to face is that judges are dismissing too many cases or are not tough enough in their sentencing.

One of the greatest victories in the prevention of drunk driving was the .08 Per Se law that was implemented in Illinois on July 2, 1997, Chapman says. According to a National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) report entitled “Effectiveness of the Illinois .08 Law” (Voas et al., 2000), it noted that during the first

18 months the .08 law was in effect, driving under the influence (DUI) arrests increased by 11 percent and that the average blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of arrested drivers decreased from .18 to .16. In addition, the number of drivers in fatal crashes who had BACs less than .10 decreased by 22 percent. Overall, there was a 14 percent decrease in drinking drivers involved in fatal crashes relative to the number that would have been predicted to occur.

AAIM has an “unfinished agenda” of 20 DUI public policies they hope will be enacted in the future as a way to further positively impact the number of people who die or are injured each year as a result of DUI crashes. The agenda includes raising the bar entry age to 21 in all of Illinois, prohibiting the sale of beer at gas stations and confiscating driver’s licenses from minors who are found to be drinking alcohol, not only for offenses related to driving under the influence.

## Power of the People

Lobbying is a critical part of every preventionist’s job, says Bedell. “Legislators need to hear from people involved in prevention on many of these bills because you know they’re hearing from the beer and alcohol companies. We have to tell them our side,” Bedell says.

Bedell says public policy, whether in the schools or on a state or national level, is getting stronger and stronger every year when it comes to prevention. But the work for preventionists, and the public as a whole, is hardly over, especially as new threats emerge. She encourages everyone in the community to speak out on issues they feel strongly about as people are often surprised at the power they have.

“I tell people, ‘You can make a difference’,” she says. “People don’t have to sit and wait for something to happen. They can make it happen through public policy.”

*Ingebrigtsen is a freelance writer.*

<sup>1</sup> [smokefreeillinois.org](http://smokefreeillinois.org)

<sup>2</sup> *Program Descriptions & Targeted Outcomes for Provider Assigned Programs, Prevention First, 2008*

<sup>3</sup> [dhs.state.il.us](http://dhs.state.il.us)

<sup>4</sup> [house.gov/davis](http://house.gov/davis)

<sup>5</sup> [ilga.gov/legislation](http://ilga.gov/legislation)

<sup>6</sup> [whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/news](http://whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/news)

<sup>7</sup> [nhtsa.dot.gov](http://nhtsa.dot.gov)

