A CALL FOR COMMUNITY ACTION

Those of us who have signed the statement below have come together because we believe, like so many who will read this, that Chico is a special place. Our city regularly appears on lists of best places to live, to work, and to grow in our country. And for so many good reasons. It has a charming downtown; it is in a location of great natural beauty; it is a strong arts community; it is a “green” community, a recreation community, an entrepreneurial community, an altruistic community; and it is a town with strong K-12 schools and higher education institutions. Its values include a passion for community involvement and service. Our town has heart and spirit – and we wouldn’t want to live or work anywhere else.

Several years ago, civic and community leaders wrote a powerful document entitled “Chico Values Community.” Beginning with a declaration that a community is more than a place or a specific population, it emphasizes that we build community through bold affirmations of what we value and clear demonstrations to be who we say we are. In particular, the document recognized that the citizens of Chico have often joined hands in making commitments, working together, and taking responsibility to make our city an even better place. We believe the same effort is needed now to address a pressing challenge to our health, well-being and reputation.

Our community has a serious alcohol problem. News accounts document this on almost a daily basis. It affects countless lives, and tragically accounts for a number of deaths, year after year. Elected officials, police officers, health professionals, university, college, and K-12 administrators, community leaders, business and property owners, and other citizens of this great community, young and old, must take an active part in turning the tide.

The challenge is immense. Excessive alcohol consumption causes or is a major contributing factor to medical emergencies, injuries, sexual assaults, fights, vandalism, property damage, drunk driving, arrests, academic problems, and deaths (including five residents or visitors in the last six months) that occur in Chico. It impacts not just those directly involved but the health and safety of all community members. It has afflicted us for decades, and despite the dedicated efforts of many individuals and agencies, we believe the problem has gotten worse rather than better.

Together, we have to figure out what to do. But, first, we have to decide that we will act on what we discover. Maintaining the status quo is not an option for the sake of our community and, especially, for our young people. Yes, understanding will guide our actions. But clear purpose and high resolve will make them meaningful and consequential.

Education and prevention efforts past and present have helped, but not nearly enough. Part of the reason is that binge drinking has somehow become acceptable behavior among many young people. When they see blacking out, visiting the drunk tank, or having their stomach pumped due to intoxication as a badge of honor, we have a problem. When ingesting 21 drinks on your 21st birthday is seen as a rite of passage, instead of risking your life, we have a problem. When parents are fearful of sending their children to Chico for college because of the number of bars and parties and alcohol outlets, we have a problem. Attitudes, behaviors, and practices must change or more lives will be lost.

It is not simply a fraternity problem, or a university problem, or a south campus problem. It is a community-wide problem that will require all of us to solve. We need to confront the availability and low cost of drinks at downtown bars; the advertising and bar guides that promote cheap and excessive drinking; the lack of consequences for landlords who permit out of control parties; the impression that some businesses turn a deaf ear to safety concerns; the enforcement of public drinking laws; our approaches to alcohol and drug education; the low number of Friday classes and the amount of work assigned in all classes; and many other topics, however difficult they may seem.

Yes, Chico is a great place to live, to go to school, to visit. But like any place, it also has problems, and the alcohol problem must be addressed now. How many more parents will bury their children before we demonstrate the collective will to take action? How many family members will grieve their loved ones knowing drugs or alcohol played a part in their deaths?

Some may fear the task ahead will bring notoriety to our city, and shine a light on activities and businesses best left in the shadows. But the sad truth is that acknowledging we have an alcohol problem will not be news to very many people, because, in fact, this problem is already a magnet for some. In a survey of high school students enrolling at Chico State, 35 percent report they had more than five drinks at one sitting in the past two weeks. The national average for this group of incoming freshmen – categorized as “high risk drinkers” – is 22 percent. We want our University and our community to be known for – and attract people to – our many outstanding features, not for cheap drinks, raging parties or alcohol-related deaths. We want every citizen to see our higher education institutions as a source of pride, not embarrassment.

We understand alcohol is legal and enjoyed by many people; this is not an effort to demonize its use. But abuse of alcohol – and not just by young people, of course – is pervasive, and accepted by many, in our community. We also understand that illegal drug use and prescription drug abuse are themselves serious problems and are often contributing factors in overdose deaths.

By no means do we underestimate the challenge ahead of us. We seek to understand the many complexities to this problem, and then act firmly. It may go without saying, but students and other young people, and their parents, must play an important role in finding a solution, and changing the drinking culture that exists.

This message is a call for action.

The action must be focused, comprehensive, and certain. We cannot idle in denial or hesitancy. Our next steps include community meetings early in 2013 where experts, parents, students, and University and community members can discuss the challenges and chart solutions. More information on these meetings will be forthcoming. Please contact the office of Drew Calandrella, CSU, Chico’s Vice President for Student Affairs, at (530) 898-6131 if you are interested in attending. Your support is crucial if we are to succeed. And, in this case, “if” is not an option.

Thank you.

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