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The Research Director  
Law, Justice and Safety Committee  
Inquiry into Alcohol Related Violence in Queensland  
Parliament House



23 October 2009

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Please find attached a submission prepared by me on behalf of the Gold Coast Management of Public Intoxication Project, a community based project funded through the Queensland Department of Communities. My contact details appear below.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission. As allowed under the terms of submission, I respectfully request that parts of this submission remain confidential, on the following basis:

Thank you for consideration of this request, and for the opportunity to submit this response.

Angela Driscoll, B. Ed., M. Ed (Psych)

MPIP Co-ordinator

# Gold Coast Management of Public Intoxication Project

Submission to

## Law, Justice and Safety Committee

### Inquiry Into Alcohol Related Violence in Queensland

**Submitting Organisation:** the Gold Coast Management of Public Intoxication Project (MPIP) is a community based, state funded project developed to address issues around public intoxication primarily associated with the consumption of alcohol. MPIP operates the Chill Out Zone in Orchid Avenue, Surfers Paradise Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights each week as well as special events. The Chill Out Zone is an immediate care and First Aid facility for persons intoxicated in public places. Through the Co-ordinator's position, the project also offers community education (primarily in secondary schools) and collaborative input with stakeholders to address alcohol related issues.

The organization exists solely to minimize alcohol related harm, and to work with stakeholders to develop and implement strategies that further assist in prevention.

#### **Best practice in Harm Minimisation**

**The Chill Out Zone:** MPIP believes that the Chill Out Zone itself represents best practice in harm minimization for precincts with a high concentration of licensed venues. Developed by the community to suit the region, the Chill Out Zone has been operating for ten years in the nightclub precinct. The first of its kind in the world, the Chill Out Zone is utilized by Police, the venues, Council, patrons and security service to provide care and supervision to individuals affected by alcohol or other drugs.

The Chill Out Zone assists over 2000 clients each year, and provides drinking water to over 100 000 people per year. Through data collection and analysis, the Chill Out Zone is able to identify trends and issues, both in terms of individual behaviours and precinct related conditions. Recently, the Chill out Zone model has been the subject of inquiries for replication from a number of other regions, in Queensland, in other states and internationally.

The presence of the Chill Out Zone relieves pressure on Police officers and the Hospital by providing assessment, care and supervision to individuals who may otherwise become the problem of statutory services. Given the community based nature of the project, the Chill Out Zone is much less resource intensive than other services.

**Other strategies:** MPIP has been involved in a number of other strategies within Surfers Paradise that address issues of alcohol related harm or violence. These include the Intervene Radio Project (early detection and intervention into possible incidents of violence or anti-social behavior), safer venues training, training for security staff in recognizing drug affected patrons and managing alcohol affected

patrons. In each of these projects, MPIP has worked with other stakeholders, including industry, to develop and implement the strategies.

This collaboration is extremely important to affect meaningful long term change.

Restrictions on the use of Glass: MPIP was recently involved in an "Alternatives to Glass" Forum, hosted by the Surfers Paradise Licensed Venues Association (SPLVA). The forum had a number of speakers, including licensees who had made the change, the Director of Emergency Medicine from the Gold Coast Hospital, Liquor Licensing representatives and manufacturers of alternative products. These sorts of forums, which allow a number of points of view to be heard and discussed, are extremely valuable in encouraging collaboration and developing an evidence base for decision making.

While the Forum did not aim to draw conclusions, there was general consensus that toughened glass may be just as injurious as traditional glass. Various international strategies were also studied, that indicated no substantial decrease in violence, but a definite reduction in the severity of injuries from these types of assaults when certain types of alternatives to glass were used.

The Chill Out Zone sees a number of clients who have been the victims of glass related assault, and the Co-ordinator has presented a number of times on this issue. The Chill Out Zone recorded 38 incidents in the twelve month period of 2008 where glass was used as a weapon in an assault. Many of these are not reported to the Police or Hospital. Unreported alcohol related violence and harm is likely to be far more prevalent than the level of reported incidents would indicate. Through stakeholder meetings, this issue is able to be addressed, but the increasing emphasis on penalizing venues monetarily for incidents may make this untenable in the future. Given that all parties should be involved in addressing issues, this is concerning.

Recent developments in the issue of glass related assaults have also disappointingly been played out in the media rather than through established pathways. Since the legislative support for Accord groups was given last year, there has been a concerted effort by stakeholders to attend and contribute to Accord groups. The MPIP co-ordinator is a member of the SPLVA Accord, and the Secretary of the Liquor Industry Consultative Association (LICA) of the Gold Coast, both of which take considerable time. The decision by the State government to address issues through the media left many individuals and groups feeling that this was wasted time. Given the potential of these groups to affect real change, this is also very concerning.

The Chill Out Zone has treated individuals who have been struck with annealed glass, toughened glass, tempered glass and polycarbonate vessels. Identifying injury patterns and severity through these incidents could have assisted in making more appropriate guidelines for venues on the use of alternatives in their premises.

International examples of glass replacement have afforded mixed results, and it is important that Queensland pursue an evidence based approach to allow the best possible outcomes. In my experience, many licensees are just as concerned with alcohol related violence as other stakeholders, and should be included in the process of developing strategies to address alcohol related violence and harms.

Security measures: Continual Training and professionalization of the security industry have addressed many issues previously associated with the security industry. An emphasis on training and conflict resolution has seen significant differences from MPIPs perspective within the security provider industry. Continued regulation and enforcement in the industry is very important to maintain a professional and positive industry.

Surfers Paradise has in place a number of strategies to strengthen community safety, and these have been embraced by all stakeholders and patrons.

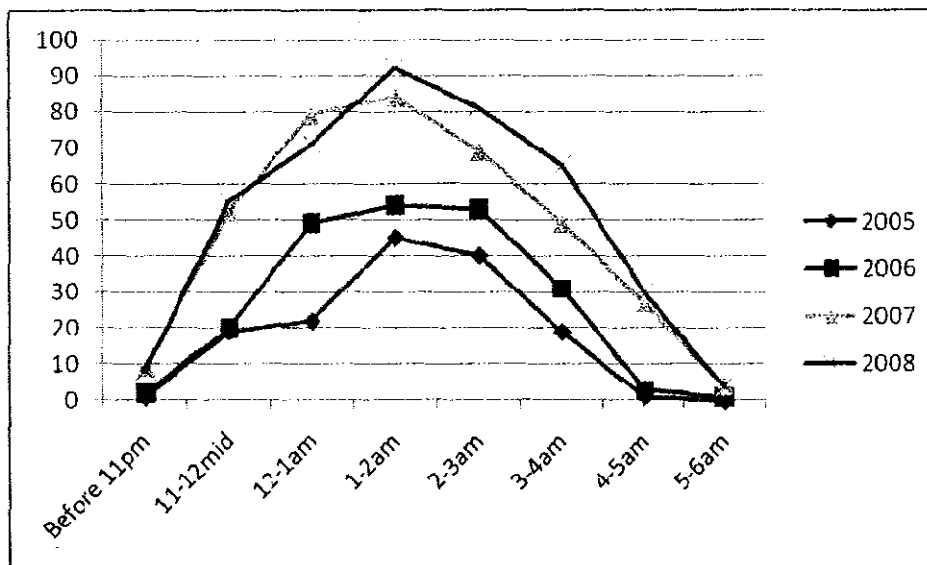
Many security measures unfortunately concentrate on the symptoms of the issue, when addressing the cause is far more likely to have a positive effect. This is particularly true of using alternatives to glass or scanning devices. Scanning devices may provide a disincentive for offenders, and assist in identification if assaults do occur, but may also displace the problem to venues that do not have scanners, or outlying areas where scanners are not used, and the resources to address the issues do not exist.

**Impact of late opening hours on Alcohol Related Violence**

It is often noted that 3-5am opening times are considered high risk for violence. As the Chill Out Zone is located in Surfers Paradise, a precinct with many late opening venues, it is interesting to note that data obtained through the Chill Out does not support this, but rather notes alcohol related violence as peaking prior to 3am.

The following table represents the number of clients presenting at the Chill Out Zone for assault related injuries over the past four years.

**ASSAULT RELATED INJURY PRESENTATION BY TIME**



Interestingly, alcohol related violence is also linked frequently to overt intoxication. If this were so, presumably the peak time for alcohol related violence would be later in the night as individuals continue to consume alcohol. An earlier peak would suggest that factors other than overt intoxication may be more important.

### **Flow on Issues for Police and Emergency Service Workers**

As mentioned, the Chill Out Zone represents an excellent strategy to address alcohol related harm in highly concentrated licensed precincts, and in particular the strain on emergency services through an influx of clients at peak periods.

Working closely with the Police and Ambulance Services, MPIP would like to acknowledge the excellent work done by these services under difficult circumstances. It is also worth noting that, although the Chill Out Zone has no designated security and deals primarily with intoxicated people, many of them highly agitated, the Chill Out Zone has not recorded an assault on staff in over ten years of operation. Although this is primarily due to the caliber of the staff, it is also important to acknowledge the framework in which the Chill Out Zone operates, and the skills and training of the staff in dealing with intoxicated persons. For some statutory services, additional training in dealing with intoxicated persons and identifying which other substances they may be using may be helpful, as this can give an indicator of likely behaviour. It is interesting to note that the immediate environment of the Chill Out Zone for many years was a violence free zone, although this is changing now, but does indicate that there is some degree of judgement even among those who are prone to violence.

A precinct such as Surfers Paradise, with a high concentration of venues, does mean that many issues are contained in a small area. It also means that resources are able to be concentrated where they are most needed, and those resources can be integrated to work more effectively. The Intervene Radio network is a good example of this.

### **Education Campaigns and Their Role in Cultivating Effective Social Change**

Through discussions with clients in the Chill Out, as well as over 10 000 people a year through community education initiatives, MPIP feels qualified to state that very few education campaigns have their intended effect. The exception to this would be the Drinkwise "Kids Absorb Your Drinking" campaign, which was seen by many as the most penetrative message around alcohol.

In particular, shock education campaigns such as those used for glassing or to address underage drinking were seen as predictable and, in some cases, laughable. In the case of the "One Punch Can Kill" campaign, a frequent response to promotional materials was "Where do I have to punch them?". Although said humourously, it provides an indication of the level to which violence is gaining acceptance, and seen as commonplace. This is result of a range of cultural factors, of which shock campaigns play a part.

One key factor may be to move away from campaign based education and actually make alcohol and other drug education, as well as social values awareness, a more concrete part of the school curriculum.

Although the State Government maintains that alcohol and drug education is available in all schools, this is actually a matter of choice for individual schools. This can lead to inconsistent application, a lack of knowledge and a lack of understanding of best practice principles.

The twelve principles of school alcohol and drug education discouraged the use of external educators for one off presentations, but did not replace this with rigorously developed, up to date and relevant resources. Ideally, an integration of the two is likely to have the best outcomes, as relevant information and its practical application are considered two key components of successful education.

Often resources available for use in schools are not locally produced, outdated or beyond the budgetary scope of schools. For some schools, the drug and alcohol education of their students is seen as a family responsibility, despite the fact that consumption can severely impact on school related behaviours.

A coherent and evidence based approach combining parent education and upskilling, as well as school based education, would provide the ideal opportunity for effective education campaigns. Many campaigns that have been produced in recent years are the object of amusement for many young people.

Many Australians are unaware of the potential for damage in young drinkers, or the elevated risk of adverse consequences. Rather than focussing on shock tactics, integrated and consistent education would raise awareness of these issues, and may assist in effecting change.

It is a tragic fact that a number of families and schools across Queensland lose young people each year, many of them to alcohol related causes. Developing strategies to utilise and address community feelings when tragic incidents do occur would be a better use of resources. Sadly, it is at this times that students are most receptive to discussions about the risks involved in alcohol consumption.

Preventive education should also occur in Primary Schools. These programs should be focussed on developing resilience and decision making skills, as well as appropriate social skills, rather than overtly on alcohol or drug related issues.

### **Other Harm Minimisation Initiatives**

The issues paper outlines a number of possible harm minimisation strategies. Each of these has been considered or implemented in other jurisdictions. It is very important that any measures looked at for implementation in Queensland be independently evaluated for their effectiveness. To do otherwise is to waste resources and damage the collaborative processes that are vital to successful outcomes.

Community safety principles should also extend to all areas, particularly for those precincts with a high concentration of Licensed Venues, including built design principles and CEPTED principles. Environmental planning should also be based on the night time environment as well as the day time.

Community safety principles should be given priority in Town Planning and Development issues.

## **Why do some Individuals Become Violent Offenders After Consuming Alcohol?**

It is highly unlikely that these individuals “become” violent, but rather that they have a propensity for violence, or a lack of impulse control even prior to imbibing alcohol. While it is true that alcohol consumption does impede impulse control and inhibitions, an individual would need to be highly intoxicated to commit aggressive acts if they did not have the propensity to aggression. This is not applicable in the case of hypoxic shock, where the depressant affects of alcohol restrict oxygen to the brain, and can make an individual respond in a “fight or flight” mode to perceived threats, although this condition is itself a sign of excessive intoxication.

It is certainly true that alcohol has a range of effects that can heighten the propensity for aggressive behaviour – depressing the central nervous system and its associated functions, rendering the reading of social cues more difficult and increasing recklessness. However, observation of almost 35 000 people each weekend in Surfers Paradise underlines the ridiculousness of the assumption that alcohol alone causes violence. Very few individuals who choose to consume alcohol in the Surfers Paradise precinct become violent, despite the widespread high level of intoxication. Research reported through Griffith University has also shown that individuals may be more prone to aggressive behaviours if they have had a bad day, a variable almost impossible to control for.

It is very important to focus efforts on identifying individual traits that may lead to aggression and violence. The environment, including venues, does have a role to play in decreasing the likelihood of aggressive behaviour, but the ultimate responsibility for violence must rest with the individual’s choice to respond with aggression.

A prominent child and adolescent psychologist has argued that modern parenting practices often emphasise the prevention of disappointment for young people, lessening their resilience to disappointment, and heightening their response to perceived disrespect through an elevated level of self-importance. These are very likely contributory factors to increased levels of violence.

Importantly, rates of serious assault have declined in most Australian states, including Queensland. The nature of violence and aggression has changed – resolution of disputes through aggressive means has escalated, while random violence has declined. Schools are reporting higher levels of interpersonal violence, in situations where alcohol is not involved.

### **Underage Drinking**

A possible avenue for addressing the individual factors may lie in raising awareness of the effects of alcohol. No systematic campaign for education and awareness around alcohol exists in Australia, despite the fact that 85% of Australians drink on a regular basis, many to the point of intoxication. The widespread use of alcohol is also a factor in the view that it is a harmless substance. Many adults believe that underage drinking is relatively harmless, as “we did it in our day, and we survived”. There is little awareness that modern culture is very different particularly in relation to drinking. Children are commencing their drinking careers younger, drinking more potent alcohol in less supervised

environments and drinking to intoxication intentionally. Underage drinking in 2009 is not the same as it was in the 70s, 80s or 90s.

By its nature, much underage drinking takes place with no adult supervision. There are few safeguards in place to model appropriate behaviour or to regulate consumption. Young people are making their own decisions around behaviour while intoxicated, and have developed their social style and persona well before they are able to enter a Licensed Venue. Excessive consumption combined with the natural recklessness of this age group is likely to lead to a significant increase in alcohol related harm and violence in the near future.

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**Conclusion**

The issue of alcohol related violence is highly complex. On a positive note, the community recognises that this is an issue, and the current commitment to collaboration, particularly in Surfers Paradise, is high.

Through the Chill Out Zone, MPIP has a unique and wide ranging view of violence in and around licensed premises, but also acknowledges that alcohol related violence is far more wide-reaching than that. Just as concerning as alcohol related violence in and around Licensed premises is the involvement of alcohol in many facets of violence, including domestic and intrafamilial violence and sexual assault.

MPIP believes that an evidence based, carefully constructed plan to address these issues is necessary. The plan should address all facets of alcohol related violence, and involve all stakeholders in its development and implementation.