
Place of Last Drink

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INTRODUCTION

The Place of Last Drink (POLD) project began through Partnership for Change (PFC), an organization that serves nine cities in northwest Hennepin County, Minnesota. Planning for POLD began in early 2013, and the first pilot launch in a community was in February 2014.

PFC conducted a community assessment in 2012 that highlighted concerns around youth and young adult alcohol use and drinking and driving.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROBLEM

A survey of young adults in the region showed that 52% of 21- to 25-year-olds reported binge drinking (having five or more drinks on the same occasion at least once in the past 30 days).¹ The percentage of motor vehicle crashes that were alcohol-related was 4.5%, which was slightly lower than the 4.9% found statewide, but still a concerning number.¹

PFC was also concerned about the burden that irresponsible alcohol use put on local health systems. In 2011, 1,128 emergency medical system (EMS) responses were related to alcohol, which was 5% of total responses.¹ Within the PFC region, EMS responded to an average of three alcohol-related emergencies each day.¹

Several police departments in the region were focused on alcohol-related driving offenses; however, efforts had reached a plateau in recent years. Data showed that reductions in alcohol-related motor vehicle fatalities statewide had slowed. Anecdotally, officers reported that they felt they had a good handle on current strategies but were looking for the next step to take.

Working with existing law enforcement contacts, the coalition invited police chiefs from the region to attend a planning meeting. PFC knew that they wanted law enforcement leadership buy-in for decisions early in the process. At the meeting, PFC presented information and asked questions about potential strategies to address drinking and driving. Included in the discussion were limited research results from projects addressing the location where an offender consumed alcohol before a driving under the influence (DUI) arrest.^{2,3}

Chiefs were interested in hearing more and immediately began to discuss the potential. One chief questioned why a project would only look at the last drink location for a driving offense and not for other offenses. That one question would significantly broaden the scope of the eventual POLD project.

PROJECT RATIONALE AND GOALS

The goal of the POLD project was to reduce high-risk and binge drinking among youth and young adults by identifying and addressing locations where they consumed alcohol. Because of existing laws against overservice of alcohol as well as regulatory authority, POLD focused on addressing serving practices at licensed retail establishments, such as a bar, restaurant, or community event. PFC and partner cities also collected information about other drinking locations (e.g., private residences, parks) for potential interventions and strategies.

POLD efficiently identified patterns of alcohol use and allowed police departments to concentrate education and enforcement efforts toward areas of concern. To address the overservice and binge drinking among youth problem, the POLD task force created systems change and policy among law enforcement to identify the location where a person last consumed alcohol when they were involved in an alcohol-related incident such as DUI, assault, or other offense. This led to the development of an online data collection system that shared information between participating police departments and collected last drink information at the time of the incident rather than later in the adjudication process.

POLD was adopted as a strategy as a result of strong positive response from police chiefs. PFC immediately formed a task force charged with developing the project. The goal of the POLD task force was to create a system for collecting data about alcohol-involved law enforcement incidents that could also be implemented in ways to fit the circumstances of local communities. Brooklyn Center, Osseo, and Plymouth police chiefs nominated a representative from their local police departments to serve on the task force. Each representative provided a specific set of skills, such as computer science and community outreach, in addition to law enforcement experience. The task force met regularly to begin researching and developing a practical and operative system to collect last-drink data.

Early on, the task force reviewed two distinct options for collecting last-drink data. Projects were identified in California, New Mexico, and Utah that collected information from DUI offenders at some point in the adjudication or court process (e.g., a survey administered when they attended a victim impact panel). The second distinct option came from a pilot study in Washington State and an ongoing project in New Hampshire in which last drink information was collected by law enforcement officers at the time of offense.

An initial feasibility assessment indicated that collecting information at the time of offense would potentially be the better option. Task force members reviewed information from the projects and held a conference call discussion with the New Hampshire project and decided to collect information at the time of the offense for three primary reasons.

First, the data would be more immediate and actionable, potentially within hours of the offense, compared with receiving data months after the event. Second, New Hampshire's experience and the officers' own judgment eased concerns about the validity of collecting information from a potentially intoxicated person. They agreed that officers are trained and experienced to collect information from individuals in a variety of circumstances, including while the person is intoxicated. Third, the officers and other partners agreed that seeking to collect information later in the adjudication process would require change in the county-level court system, which was far from certain and could jeopardize the ability to implement the project within the grant period.

Once decided on when to collect data, the task force had to create a system for collecting the data from officers and departments. It was determined that PFC would need to create an online, Web-based portal for data entry. The task force also decided that the system should be built for statewide use, not just for the region. They reasoned that a statewide system would cost the same to create, would be more effective, and would have greater sustainability.

The task force made decisions by consensus. The task force respected and allowed autonomy within each participating police department to make decisions about how the project would be implemented with its own officers. For example, police departments had to make decisions about how data would be entered in the database. Some police departments selected to use direct-entry, meaning each officer entered his or her own alcohol-related incidents into the POLD system. Other police departments chose to use single-point entry, meaning one person in the police department received incident records and entered the relevant information in the POLD system. During the pilot phase, the task force assessed each method, determined that either was an acceptable way to handle the data, and continued to allow autonomy for the data-entry process.

STRATEGIES

The POLD project sought to collect information about law enforcement response and calls for service resulting from alcohol consumption. Law enforcement use the data to identify patterns and then address areas of concern.

Several facets of the program led to early and ongoing success of the POLD project, starting with the structure of the database. The database was designed to be an online platform easily accessible to officers. The case entry form, while collecting important information, was mainly checkboxes and drop-down lists. The form collected

information about the incident (date, offense type, and location), primary contact (victim or offender, gender, age, blood alcohol concentration), and place of last alcohol consumption (type of location, address). The form also included a field for officers to include notes about the incident. Officers reported that entering each case took 30 to 60 seconds.

Second, to be effective, the POLD data needed to be used, not just collected. An officer had access to real-time data analytics about their department and the retailers located in their jurisdiction. The heads-up display visualized data about offense and location type and listed the 10 establishments in that jurisdiction indicated most often as a last-drink location. Officers had immediate access to this information through one click in the POLD system to support data-informed policing strategies. The officers also saw the results of their data collection, which reinforced the importance of consistent collection.

Third, administrators within each police department had the ability to run reports from the POLD database. The system had automatic reports to look at cases by specific retailer and other reports to make the data useable and meaningful. Administrators could also export the data into other systems such as Excel to run other analyses as needed. The POLD system was created to allow officers and departments the ability to collect and analyze data to better understand patterns of alcohol misuse in their communities and be able to respond rapidly to problems identified.

Lastly, the task force was aware that department and officer motivation to consistently use the system would be key to its success. As a new police department started to use the system, they were encouraged to communicate clearly and directly to officers to remind them of using POLD and benefits to public safety.

PFC assisted in police department launches by providing training and officer recognitions. A note was sent to each officer for his or her first entry in the system and a recognition sign to the officer with the most entries for that department for the month. On a quarterly basis, PFC would compile a database report to show each department where they stood in comparison to other departments. PFC also created several reminder materials to be used at the departments (window clings, decals, screen cleaner cloths) to help keep POLD at the forefront of department initiatives.

The POLD task force and PFC educated retailers about POLD and the significance of not overserving their customers. Each police department was encouraged to send a letter to retailers to notify them at the start of collecting POLD data. The letter reminded retailers about laws against serving an obviously intoxicated person and provided information about responsible beverage service trainings and available resources.

PFC created various educational materials geared for servers and sellers of alcohol. The message of “Last call is your call” was distributed through posters and coasters. In several communities, the law enforcement agency hand-delivered the materials so that officers could talk to retailers in person.

Police departments began to make use of the POLD data almost immediately. In approximately half of all alcohol-involved incidents, the person involved reported drinking at a licensed establishment. It is important to note that only a small number of retailers were identified as a concern through the POLD data.

Law enforcement operated with the understanding that a POLD entry did not indicate that a sale to an obviously intoxicated person had occurred. Alcohol may have been a factor in an incident even if the person was not obviously intoxicated. Also, without further evidence or details, officers were unable to determine how a person appeared when they purchased their last drink. In some cases, officers could follow-up on a POLD incident, but a POLD entry in itself should not be interpreted to mean that an establishment overserved an individual.

Law enforcement watched for patterns of POLD entries. If an establishment had several entries per month, which over time presented a pattern, the police department could follow up with a retailer. For example, one department noticed a day of the week displaying higher POLD entries than others and looked at the drink specials and promotions the retailer had for that night of the week.

When follow-up with a retailer was necessary, essential steps had to be taken to prevent miscommunication between the police department and owner. First, the department representative and owner would review the data that raised concern. The department and retailer would discuss changes, such as hiring a night supervisor or revising policy regarding overservice. Several retailers were open to listening to the feedback and sought to address concerns without further intervention.

When a situation did not improve after multiple discussions between law enforcement and the retailer, the police department would work with the city attorney to present the case to the city council. The city council (or county board) is the licensing authority and has the ability to suspend or revoke an alcohol license. In the few cases that have been referred to city council, retailers improved business practices and no suspensions or revocations have been issued to date.

PFC conducted communications activities to inform and raise awareness in the community about the issues of alcohol consumption, overservice, and coalition strategies. The POLD task force made a decision to be very conservative with community-wide communication about specific POLD incidents. The task force reasoned that they did not want a restaurant owner to open the newspaper to find out about an issue with their establishment. The police departments wanted to be respectful of working with retailers to improve practices, not to deal with overservice in the court of public opinion. Public communication about POLD focused on the project and general findings, not individual retailers, until the point that a retailer was brought in front of the city council.

The POLD project faced surprisingly few challenges from alcohol retailers. In an initial letter notifying establishments that the local police department would begin

collecting the information, not a single retailer contacted the department with questions or concerns.

When one retailer had been identified as a concern, the owner and attorney questioned POLD with a few points, each of which were countered by the police department. One concern raised by the retailer was about inadequate communication with the retailer and its attorney. The department had documentation of repeated phone calls, meetings, and letters to the retailer. Second, they questioned being able to determine that an illegal sale had occurred at the restaurant after the fact. The department continually educated that POLD is about patterns and trends and that, in this case, the pattern was clear and egregious. In terms of addressing problematic retailers, POLD data illustrated use of law enforcement resources and potential risk to public safety, not a single case of illegal service. The POLD system allowed the department to present a data-focused explanation of their concerns and why serving practices needed to be addressed.⁴

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND PARTNERS

The primary champions in the POLD project were local law enforcement agencies. The agency made the decision to participate in POLD, led the project locally, and worked with licensed establishments.

Each police department relied on the support of city attorneys, city managers, and local elected officials. The departments informed and received input from city attorneys about relevant local ordinances. If a department identified a concern about a retailer that was not being remedied, law enforcement would work with the city attorney to present information to the council for action. The council relied on recommendations from the city attorney about the options available. A few cities have strengthened local ordinance about retailers' responsibilities to prevent overservice of alcohol and have relied on city attorneys to develop that language.

POLD also relied on the local licensing authority, which is nearly always a city council or county board. The council set a tone for what was expected of local retailers. Most successful POLD communities had a council with a history of taking alcohol control seriously. They issued penalties for retailers who failed alcohol compliance checks and expressed the importance of retailers being responsible. POLD relied on the council to review cases presented to them and deal with potentially problematic retailers.

Alcohol retailers were a significant stakeholder in POLD efforts. The majority took a proactive approach to prevent overservice. When alcohol retailers were notified by the police department or city council, nearly all quickly and thoughtfully produced a mitigation plan. Plans included changes in policies, staff training, supervision and security, and hours and pricing of food and alcohol.

The POLD project benefited from a close partnership with the Minnesota Department of Public Safety, Alcohol, and Gambling Enforcement Division (AGED). AGED provided subject matter expertise and helped recruit police departments to join the POLD project.

FUNDING/ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT

PFC had additional funding through a Strategic Prevention Framework State Incentive Grant and was prepared to focus resources on the issue of young adult alcohol use. The POLD project was initially funded through a grant from the Minnesota Department of Human Services given to PFC. The grant funded the coordinator, development of the POLD system, an initial data analysis report, and project materials. PFC currently has a Drug-Free Communities grant that supports involvement of a coordinator in the POLD efforts.

Participating law enforcement agencies contributed staff time to the POLD task force and for the implementation of the project. Officer data entry, department data analysis, and efforts to address issues with retailers were all conducted using local resources and were not funded by the grant.

North Memorial Health Care, which operates a hospital in Robbinsdale, Minnesota, is the fiscal host for PFC. The hospital coordinates PFC through the injury prevention program within its Level I Trauma Center. Involvement of North Memorial helped underscore connections between high-risk alcohol use and health consequences. Because of the amount of local resources and partner commitment that support the POLD project, it has been sustained beyond the initial grant funding that ended in June 2015.

EVALUATION AND OUTCOMES

POLD has directed efforts in an innovative direction to further reduce DUIs, injuries, and other offenses related to alcohol use. The data have also been used to guide Retail Alcohol Vendor Education and Enforcement, an initiative that partners with retailers to help improve serving practices with the goal of reducing alcohol-related incidents in the community. Since POLD launched to three police departments in February 2014, it has expanded to 28 agencies statewide.

Because of differences in implementation among communities, POLD outcomes are best analyzed over time for each community. Comparisons and system-wide results can be informative, but are limited by varying implementation dates, types of incidents included (some police departments collect only for traffic issues), and differences in community context.

In a case study of one of the first departments to begin using POLD, the project found significant impact from efforts. The police department initially documented 43 POLD incidents that named a particular retailer that accounted for 75% of all entries from

licensed establishments. The average blood alcohol concentration from DUI arrests that indicated this retailer as the place of last alcohol consumption was 0.172.⁴ Repeated meetings with law enforcement had little effect, but once the city council warned of license penalties, entries dropped to fewer than three entries in a 3-month period and the improvement has been sustained.

Of those 28 agencies, only a few needed to work with the city council to confront drinking incidents; one police department noticed a decline in alcohol-related incidents over time. Others noticed a decline in POLD entries after meeting with the owner once and continuing communication quarterly.

LESSONS LEARNED

Involve Partners Early On in Decision-Making

PFC works closely with a variety of community partners. When PFC began considering enforcement strategies to address overservice of alcohol, three law enforcement representatives were active in those discussions. It was recognized that those three officers alone could not be responsible for charting the course for the region. PFC reached out to the nine police chiefs in the region to provide input on strategy selection and initial direction. Following outreach, each police department was asked to participate on the task force. PFC ensured initial input from all partners and opened the door for ongoing involvement.

Be Willing to Think Big

PFC began this effort with the vision of addressing drinking and driving in the region. Much of the success of POLD comes from actively listening to partners. A police chief questioned why his department would care only about alcohol if someone were driving and not if that person was involved in an assault. As a consequence, the project expanded to include all alcohol-involved incidents. The POLD task force questioned the limitations of a regional database; therefore, the project expanded to be available to all communities in Minnesota. Although projects should avoid mission creep, they also need to see beyond arbitrary constraints based on grant funding, borders, or other issues that could limit the ultimate effectiveness of the project.

Work Toward a Comprehensive Approach

POLD works best under a framework of policies to address overservice. It is not a silver bullet to reduce alcohol-related incidents in a community. Rather, it is an innovative approach to create buy-in and support appropriate interventions. Before starting the

collection of POLD, major stakeholders should first agree that reducing alcohol-related consequences in the community is a priority and that overservice of alcohol is a significant contributing factor. POLD can then be one strategy among several that work to address overservice of alcohol.

RESOURCES

Some helpful resources for learning how to implement a similar initiative include the following:

- *Reaching Zero: Actions to Eliminate Alcohol-Impaired Driving*. Washington, DC: National Transportation Safety Board; 2013.
- To learn more about the research evidence supporting Place of Last Drink, refer to the National Liquor Law Enforcement Association, Impaired Driving Crackdowns, Place of Last Drink: <http://www.nllea.org/IDC-POLD.html>.

REFERENCES

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