

MATTAGAMI FIRST NATION'S POLICY TO REDUCE ALCOHOL-RELATED HARM

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Abstract / Résumé

Alcohol use in First Nation communities generally involves one of two perspectives. One viewpoint is that of taking a non interference, hands-off, approach with few restrictions. The other approach prohibits the use of alcohol on the Reserve. Few communities have adopted an alcohol control policy strategy which allows for the provision of alcohol at community gatherings, but places limitations and guidelines around its use. Mattagami is one Aboriginal community that has developed and implemented a policy to govern the use of alcohol at recreational facilities and green spaces. A brief description of the policy, its formulation process and community impact are described.

L'usage de l'alcool au sein des communautés des premières nations suscite l'une ou l'autre des réactions suivantes. La première consiste à adopter une politique de non ingérence constituée d'un minimum de restrictions. La seconde interdit l'usage de l'alcool sur la réserve. Rares sont les communautés qui ont adopté une politique de gestion de l'alcool qui permet la consommation lors des réunions sociales à condition qu'elle soit réglementée. La communauté autochtone de Mattagami a élaboré et adopté une politique qui réglemente l'usage de l'alcool dans les établissements récréatifs et les espaces verts. Le présent rapport décrit brièvement la politique, son élaboration et ses répercussions sur la collectivité.

Background

As historians have reported, Canadian Aboriginals were introduced to alcohol with the arrival of Europeans and the resulting fur trade. Hunnisett and Sault (1990), among other researchers, have noted the use of alcohol by unscrupulous traders to obtain furs. These drinking parties often produced aggressive and violent behaviour in Native communities. While this social history was a part of Canada's past, not all Aboriginals accepted alcohol from explorers or drank to excess (Smart and Osborne, 1996).

Following the Confederation of Canada, Aboriginals were prohibited from legally consuming alcohol for several decades (Hunnisett and Sault, 1990). Nonetheless, illegal consumption of home brewed and smuggled liquor did occur. In the 1950s, many First Nation communities, particularly those located close to non-Native communities, abandoned existing policies which prohibited alcohol use in their communities. Although prohibition and abstinence continue to be the predominant approaches to addressing alcohol abuse, social health and public order problems remain high in many

localities (Landau, 1996). While "over 60 percent of Canada's 1.5 million aboriginal adults consider alcohol to be a problem in their communities", most reported in a 1993 Statistics Canada survey that they drank less than twice a month. Unfortunately, as Smart and Ogborne (1996) commented, information pertaining to the amount consumed each occasion was not collected. Thus, an opportunity to verify the perception that Indigenous peoples engage in numerous periodic drinking episodes involving the consumption of large quantities of alcohol was missed.

Interventions to reduce alcohol-related problems have been predominately secondary and tertiary in their designs. However, recently, primary prevention programs have begun to emerge (Murray *et al.*, 1989; Health Canada, 1993). As a result Native communities are beginning to provide a more comprehensive package of treatment, early identification and education programs. However, aside from the implementation of a policy in which abstinence is mandated, Reserves have generally not considered other legislative options such as using local regulations to govern the provision and consumption of alcohol within communities. In a 1994 survey of Ontario Reserves by the Addiction Research Foundation (ARF), only five First Nation communities² had developed or were in the process of formulating policies to manage the use of alcohol in their recreational facilities (Rylett *et al.*, 1997). Similarly in the United States, few Aboriginal communities have taken advantage of developing alcohol laws as an option to favourably influence drinking behaviours and reduce problems (May, 1986; May and Moran, 1995).

Mattagami First Nation (Reserve No. 71) is one community that has begun to implement a policy intervention to reinforce moderate and appropriate drinking practices to minimize alcohol-related problems at community social gatherings. Mattagami is located on the north shore of the Minisinkwa River near Mattagami Lake in northeastern Ontario. Approximately 160 members live on-Reserve while 170 people reside off-Reserve. The Reserve, in excess of 5000 hectares, is remotely located half way between the urban cites of Timmins and Sudbury. The nearest non-Native population is 22 miles away located in the Town of Gogama. Mattagami is governed by an elected Chief and three Councillors. Community gatherings occur at the school, community hall, recreation complex and outdoor ice rink. As well, people use the waterfront, ball field, and picnic area for recreational activities (Aquafor Engineering, 1991; Ontario Native Affairs Secretariat, 1992).

In some of these recreational settings, alcohol consumption is permitted provided the user group obtains a Special Occasion Permit (SOP) from the provincial government liquor store and permission to use the Band facility

from the Band Office. In Ontario, much like the other Canadian provinces, an SOP is a licence granted to an individual or group that allows the permit holder to sell or freely provide alcohol at a one time drinking-related event such as a social gathering, sports banquet, wedding, anniversary, community festival or fund raising activity. It is estimated that approximately 84,000 permits were issued in Ontario in 1995 (Liquor License Board of Ontario, 1995).

When an SOP is issued by the provincial liquor licence board, it is done so with the understanding that the permit holder assumes responsibility for the safety and sobriety of those attending the event. Nonetheless, people have become intoxicated and disruptive at many of these events. Smart (1988), in his review of permit events noted problems, such as drinking by minors having occurred, because SOPs were run by untrained volunteers that tended to provide insufficient supervision. It was the immoderate and inappropriate use of alcohol at some of these functions in Mattagami that prompted the Chief and Council to appoint a community committee, through a Band Council Resolution, to develop a policy to govern alcohol use locally at SOP events.

Policy Development

Membership on the Alcohol Policy Committee included an Ontario Provincial Police Officer, a Community Legal Worker, a Community Health Representative, a Band Councillor, a NNADAP (National Native Alcohol and Drug Abuse Program) Worker, the Band Chief and a Program Consultant from the Addiction Research Foundation. The committee began its deliberations in November, 1992 and completed their work with the adoption of the policy in June of 1993. Over the course of several meetings held approximately every three weeks, the committee used the following terms of reference to guide its work: gather and review information on the use of alcohol pertaining to Mattagami and area; review articles on drinking practices and their implications on the management of alcohol in recreational settings; collect and review what other communities are doing to reduce alcohol problems in their recreation programs; become familiar with the *Liquor Licence Act* of Ontario as it pertains to operating drinking permit activities; identify facilities, green spaces and programs suitable for accommodating alcohol involved functions; examine past alcohol experiences to identify problem areas and good management practices; gather opinions from others in the community; review the goals of the Parks and Recreation Department; obtain suggestions from staff and volunteers; and keep Chief and Council informed of the committee's deliberations.

During the committee's deliberations, members expressed concerns about people becoming intoxicated at permit events, the serving of alcohol to youth, fights emerging during and after the event, vandalism, participants drinking alcohol and then leaving events as impaired drivers, continued drinking after the event in areas such as the waterfront, and witnessing event organizers drinking alcohol while managing the event.

The Policy

The goal of the alcohol management policy⁴ is to provide responsible management practices at drinking permit events held in Mattagami First Nation facilities so as to reduce and/or avoid alcohol related problems. On June 7, 1993, Chief and Band Council adopted the policy.

The policy document contains a listing of community facilities at which permit drinking events can be operated (community hall, dome complex, and ice rink area in summer) and a listing of those areas where alcohol is prohibited (waterfront/beach area, ball field, picnic area, day school and group areas, etc.). It also specifies that all youth and minor sport events (including banquets and street parties) are not eligible for an alcohol permit function. Youth under the legal drinking age are not permitted to attend community adult social events where alcohol is provided. They can, however, attend weddings, anniversaries and reunions where alcohol is served provided they vacate the celebration before 8:00 p.m. These regulations provide for a balance between "wet" and "dry" recreational activities. The policy also makes it possible for abstainers to participate in community activities where alcohol is provided because of a clause which requires event organizers to ensure that non-alcoholic drinks are available. As well, those in recovery are more likely to join festive occasions in which alcohol problems are not likely to occur or where they do not feel pressured to drink booze. Lastly, the policy produces a social environment that models more appropriate drinking styles for youth.

The policy also requires the posting of signs in facilities during permit drinking events informing participants that intoxicated people will not be served alcohol and that low alcohol beverages, non-alcohol drinks and food are available (see picture). Signs informing participants that there will be no "last call" to prompt patrons to buy drinks before the closing of the bar and that there is a chance of police checking for impaired drivers are also to be posted. These signs clearly inform both providers and consumers of alcohol that serving people to intoxication or drinking to get drunk are prohibited. Thus, the signs visually remind the event operators of their responsibilities and help them explain their actions to those refused service. The signs also openly notify all people (youth and adults) that excessive or inappropriate

drinking are undesirable behaviours. As Beauvais and LaBoueff (1985) advise, this is an important strategy because constraining deviant behaviour requires a clear and visible communication of community values. Similarly, to encourage appropriate abstinence in a drinking setting, a sign reminding mothers that "drinking alcohol beverages during pregnancy can harm the baby" has to be posted. While the policy requires the posting of signs to encourage moderate and appropriate drinking behaviours, it prohibits the posting of any messages or signs promoting alcohol use or the advertising of brand products where youth and children are allowed.

Since most permit drinking events are operated by volunteers with limited experience in the management of drinking environments, the policy requires that those serving alcohol, supervising the door or controlling participant activities receive training in recognizing when a person is intoxicated and what strategies to use to prevent people from becoming intoxicated. Some North American server training or education programs have been effective in reducing drunkenness and incidents of drinking and driving by patrons, at least in non-Native settings (Eliany and Rush, 1992). In Canada, one such program was tested in a sports bar, a neighbourhood tavern, a hotel lounge and a skid-row bar located in a northern Ontario city. The evaluators (Gliksman *et al.*, 1993) reported that servers who took the training were less likely to serve patrons to intoxication and engage in other inappropriate serving practices than were those servers who did not receive the training.

To provide servers of alcohol with a strategy to slow the onset of intoxication, the policy requires that at least 35% of the alcohol beverages served at a permit event have a low alcohol content (e.g., light and extra light beers, 4% and 2.5% alcohol by volume, respectively). Additionally, non-alcohol drinks are to be provided at no charge or at a price significantly lower than the cost of alcoholic drinks so as to provide an acceptable alternative to those who may be driving, in recovery or practising life long abstinence. The provision of non-alcohol drinks for drivers also complements the policy requirement to provide options, such as operating a designated driver program to transport intoxicated participants safely home.

The policy lists a number of management practices to be used at a permit event. Some of these include: providing door supervision to keep out underage youth, known trouble makers and those already intoxicated; serving drinks in paper cups to reduce the chance of injury should violence erupt; requiring event workers to refrain from consuming alcohol while working the event; providing proper supervision of all exits to prevent access by minors and the sneaking in of illegal alcohol; limiting the purchase of drinks to four per purchase so that buyers can be more frequently observed

for signs of intoxication; and the use of police to provide adequate security should Council deem it necessary.

For those groups failing to follow the policy regulations, penalties can be assessed by Chief and Council. Infractions will be reviewed by the Recreation Committee with a recommendation to Council that could result in a one year suspension of rental or participation privileges.

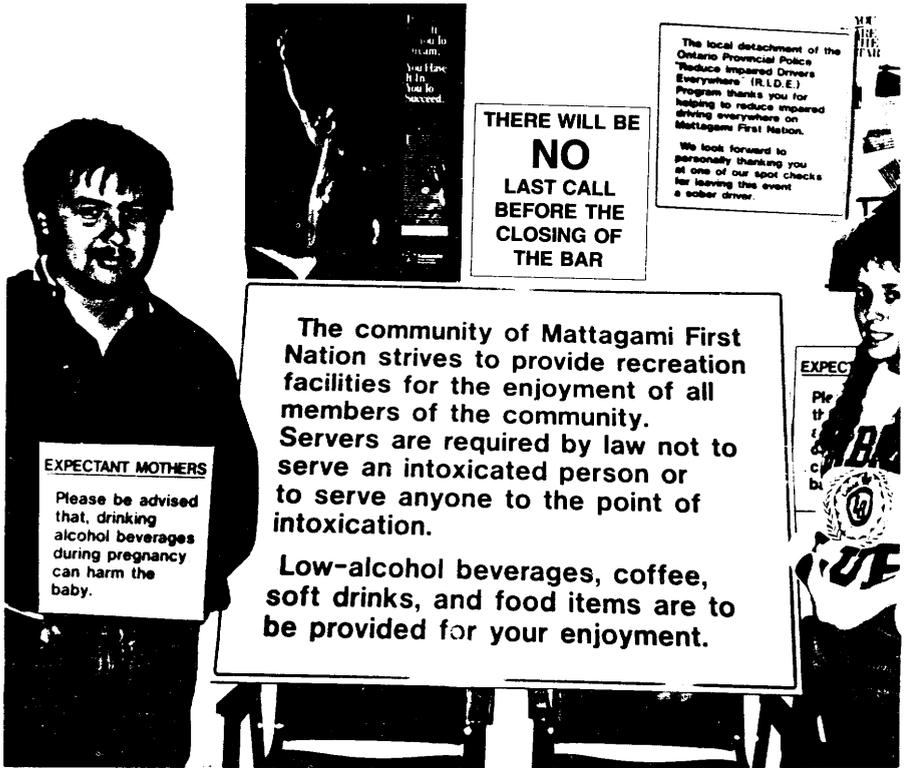
Policy Implementation

Once adopted, the policy required the policy committee to design and implement, in consultation with the Addiction Research Foundation, an orientation program to inform all users of community facilities of the policy requirements and to promote the benefits of the policy. To achieve this, the committee held information sessions for user groups and community members. In conjunction with the community information meetings, a media campaign was launched. One of the promotional items developed and disseminated was a pamphlet outlining the policy regulations and the purpose of the policy. Once the community was informed about the policy, a series of server training events were conducted with successful participants being awarded certificates in the responsible management of alcohol. Training occurred both on and off the Reserve. Some of the sessions were jointly attended with residents in the Town of Gogama as part of their alcohol policy implementation activities. As of December, 1997, an estimated 30 people have received a certificate. To reinforce the training and community information campaign, signs were posted in the appropriate recreation facilities (see picture).

Policy Impact

Since implementation of the policy, a Mattagami First Nation administration representative indicated that there has been a reduction in fights during or following events and fewer underage participants being served alcohol. Also, problems initially identified by the committee were not reported since the implementation of the policy and, therefore, neither groups nor individuals have been restricted from using the facilities.

Along with Mattagami, the four other First Nation communities that had indicated developing policies to manage alcohol in their recreation facilities during the 1994 survey were resurveyed in 1996. Aggregate results, as reported by Rylett *et al.*, (1997), indicate that Band administrative representatives perceived improvements in reductions of alcohol-related problems ranging from "somewhat" to "much improved". Of the problem behaviours identified, decreases in 12 of them were reported following



Ivan McKay, Chief of Mattagami First Nation, and Tammy Gregoire, Family Support Worker, display some of the signs to be posted in Reserve recreation facilities during alcohol-related socials and fund raising events.

policy adoption. Although the overall number of reported incidents were few, decreases, by magnitude of perceived change, were related to intoxication, non-permit drinking, verbal abuse/harassment, underage drinking, public complaints, litter, vandalism, police calls, fights and scuffles, injuries, drinking in dressing rooms and sexual assaults.

Similar preliminary findings have been reported in non-Native communities which have implemented such policies. In a survey of all Ontario municipalities, of the 107 cities and towns that had developed alcohol policies to manage permit drinking events in their municipally-owned facilities, 44 reported a decline in problems, 7 had not, 34 felt it was too soon to know or had not yet implemented their policy, 14 said they were uncertain and eight noted they had never experienced alcohol-related problems (Gliksman *et al.*, 1995). Rural towns with populations of 10,000 or less, such as Gogama, generally reported declines in underage drinking, fights and scuffles, vandalism and intoxication (Douglas *et al.*, 1997).

Prevention Implications

Mattagami, like many Aboriginal communities, is working to bring harmony to its membership by managing conflicting points of view within the community. In some instances, people would prefer that the community take a more traditional position on alcohol by prohibiting its use while others have insisted that alcohol use be integrated into their lifestyle. As a result, as noted by Hudson (1985) and May (1986), Aboriginals may live in a "semi-traditional" or "dual" world when encountering some lifestyle issues such as the use of alcohol.

Therefore, the prevention of alcohol-related problems in "wet" communities may require a dual approach—one of providing traditional education and healing for individuals along with interventions that manage alcohol use in community social settings. Researchers, such as May (1985), have reported that Aboriginal communities that have legalized the use of alcohol are experiencing fewer alcohol-related problems because of the introduction of social controls through laws. However, as previously noted, they also report that few tribal councils have taken full advantage of this legislative option.

In comparison to non-Native societies, the history of First Nation experimentation with ways of reducing alcohol-related problems has been brief. Even though many non-Native societies have developed rules to govern the use of alcohol, as Smart and Ogbome (1996) note, some problems persist and so they continue to experiment with new interventions. Likewise, it may be advantageous for Aboriginal communities to try new options—such as developing culturally appropriate alcohol-control mecha-

nisms with widespread community involvement that contributes to community health and safety (Smart and Ogborne, 1996). Erickson (1992), in noting some of the negative aspects associated with a community abstinence policy, suggests that some form of legal controls, as part of a broader harm reduction strategy, may be a more realistic alternative. Likewise, according to Landau (1996), such a shift to a harm reduction approach may, in fact, be timely. The people of Mattagami are now venturing down the uncertain, but promising, road of alcohol control policy.

Hopefully, their story will benefit others committed to reducing alcohol-related problems in First Nation communities.

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Notes

1. The opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Addiction Research Foundation or Mattagami First Nation. The Addiction Research Foundation is a Division of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.
2. The five communities and the date of policy adoption included: Moose Factory / Moccreebec (1992), Mattagami (1993), Wikwemikong (1993), Chippewas of Sarnia (1994) and Curve Lake (1995).
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