

# Nuestras Voces/Our voices: Conversations to Empower Our Youth

*Executive Report Submitted to the Oregon  
Alcohol and Drug Policy Commission (ADPC)-  
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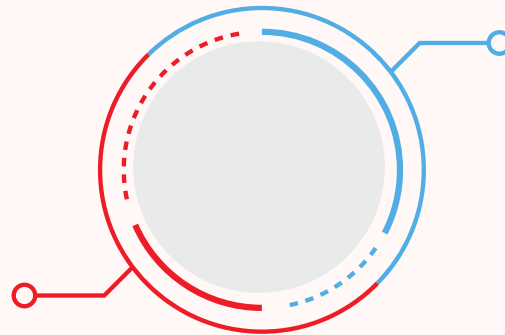
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## PURPOSE

To engage the Latinx community of Albany, Linn County, in conversations around substance use and substance use disorder. In doing this we aid and inform ADPC's strategic planning effort.



To support increased cultural and community connections and understanding around substance use and substance use related harms. This includes emerging needs specific to youth and families, primary prevention needs and solutions, barriers to care (harm reduction, treatment and recovery), and recommendations for holistic community responses.

## THE APPROACH

### Action-research approach combining learning about resources and eliciting perspectives and points of view

To learn about how the Latinx community experiences and values alcohol and drug use.



To learn about how the Latinx community addresses issues of concern they identify in relation to alcohol and drug use.

To learn about how the Latinx community approaches the discussion of issues related to alcohol and drug use with parents/family members, school staff, and peers.

To elicit recommendations on what should be done to address issues of concern regarding alcohol and drug use.

Sixteen participants that met a total of 20 times, in two groups: One of 9 youth ages 18-24 and one of 7 adults.

Nine 90-minute sessions with each group.

Learning on resources related to alcohol and drug use and expressing perspectives and points of view on the topics

# METHODOLOGY

## Session Structure

### Dinámica

An activity that works as an icebreaker and helped foster a creative space through puzzles, word searches, arts and crafts, or activities focused on getting to know each other better.

### Main Activity

The main activity for the day, centered on learning, is guided by art to facilitate open conversations.

### Self-care Activity

During this time, we explore basic self-care techniques, such as meditation, reflective writing, and participants creating their own calendar with enjoyable activities.

### Dinamica

Activity to break the ice.

Example: word search competition.



### Main Activity

Collages, drawing, and performance.

Example: Make a collage showing what comes to your mind when we say alcohol and substances?

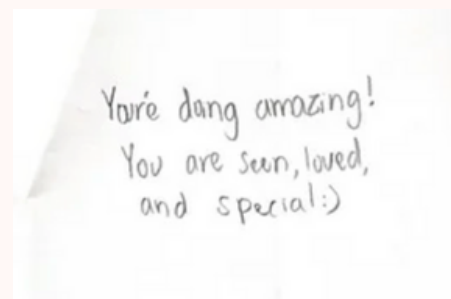


### Self-care Activity

Activity

to relax and reflect.

Example: airplane positive message to someone in the group.



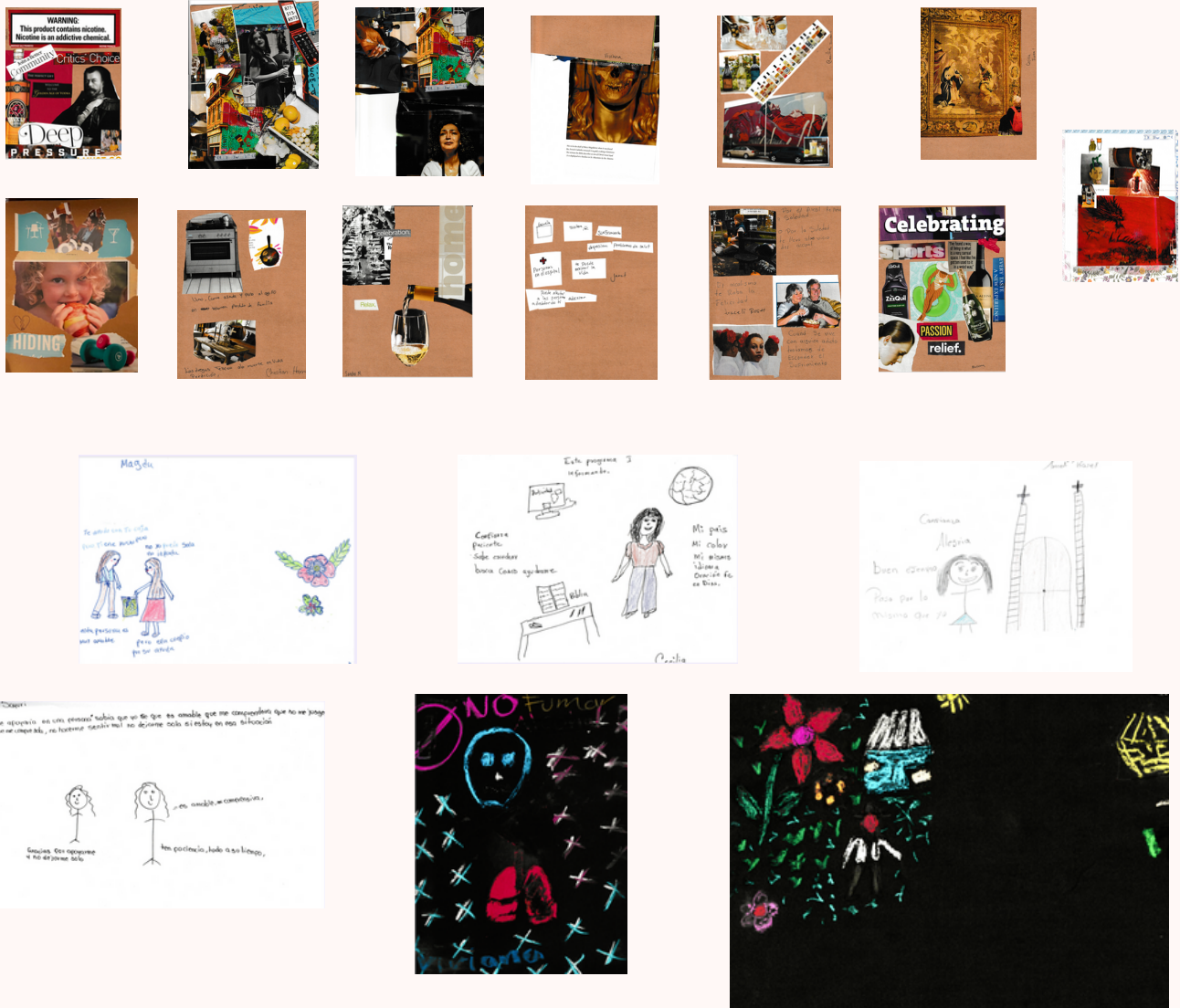
## METHODOLOGY

### Expression Through Art

The facilitator asked participants a set of questions to motivate them to express themselves through art. The questions were the following:

- What do you feel when someone mentions alcohol and drug use?
- How do you think alcohol and substance use can affect your organs and your life?
- Draw a person to whom you would go to request help and support if you were consuming alcohol or substances.
- Make action plans to address alcohol and substance use.

Below are some of the art pieces they created. Each one of these is explained answering the questions: What is happening here? How is this related to our lives? What can we do about it?



## METHODOLOGY

### Performance: Scenarios

Participants were given scenarios to perform. These scenarios were extracted from the art work and the conversations they had had regarding alcohol and substance use. The following are the six scenarios they performed:

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Pedro grows up in a community where alcohol use is normalized. Drinking is common at family gatherings, and teens are often allowed to participate. At local events, alcohol is easily available and youth supervision is minimal. By age 20, Pedro regularly drinks at social events. Over time, his consumption increases—he begins stealing alcohol from home, skips school, loses interest in sports, and shows signs of depression. His substance use escalates until one night he is hospitalized after a car accident following a party.

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Amara lives in a low-income neighborhood and faces constant stress at home. Her parents are busy with multiple jobs, and topics like mental health or substance use are rarely discussed. At school, drug education is outdated and fear-based, lacking practical or accurate information. Amara has never been taught what addiction really looks like or how to seek help. When offered alcohol and pills at a friend's house, she doesn't see the risk—she's heard they help people relax. With no adult guidance, she begins using more frequently, believing it's a normal way to cope with stress, sadness, or boredom.

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Sergio started smoking to cope with school-related stress and anxiety. Initially, it seemed to help him relax and sleep better. However, over time, he began experiencing negative health effects: falling asleep in class, trouble breathing during physical activity, and a decline in academic performance. Once a top student, he now struggles to keep up and misses classes due to headaches and stomach pain.

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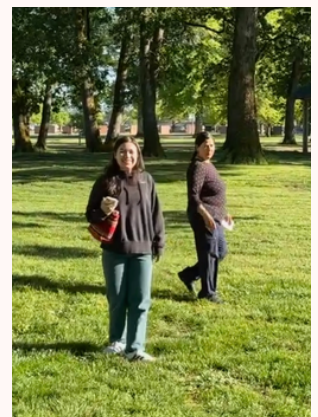
Paloma moves to the U.S. with her mother, leaving behind her support system. At her new high school, she struggles with language barriers and social integration, with no programs to support immigrant youth. Often alone at home due to her mother's long work hours, Paloma feels isolated and frustrated. She connects with a group of peers who introduce her to alcohol and marijuana, claiming it will help her relax. Initially, she feels accepted, but the substances quickly become a means of escape from her emotional and social struggles.

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Marcus lives in a tense and unstable home where his father struggles with alcoholism and is verbally abusive, while his overworked mother is emotionally distant. Feeling unseen and unsupported, Marcus lacks a stable emotional foundation or a trusted adult to turn to.

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Nia, 18, is influenced by social media posts that glamorize substance use. Wanting to feel more grown-up, she starts drinking, vaping, and using THC edibles, encouraged by the positive attention she receives online. Initially casual, her use leads to mood swings, lost motivation, and anxiety. Misled by unrealistic portrayals and without support, Nia doesn't recognize the dangers or know how to seek help

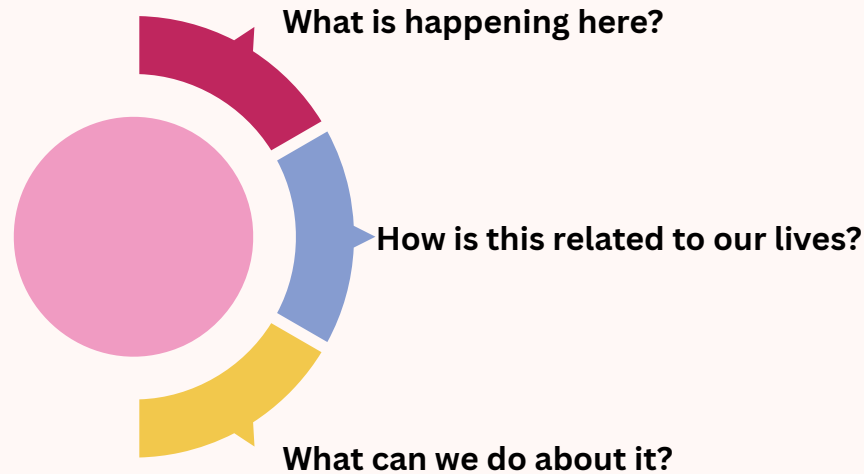




## METHODOLOGY

### Analysis

We used a modified version of the photovoice SHOWED method (see <https://shorturl.at/AxnM8>). For each one of the art pieces participants created and each one of the scenarios they performed, we asked the following questions:



Next is an example of how a participant described a collage, answering these three questions:



#### What is happening here?

I'm thinking that people use alcohol and other substances as medicine. It's also very common to consume these things during sports or to celebrate something.

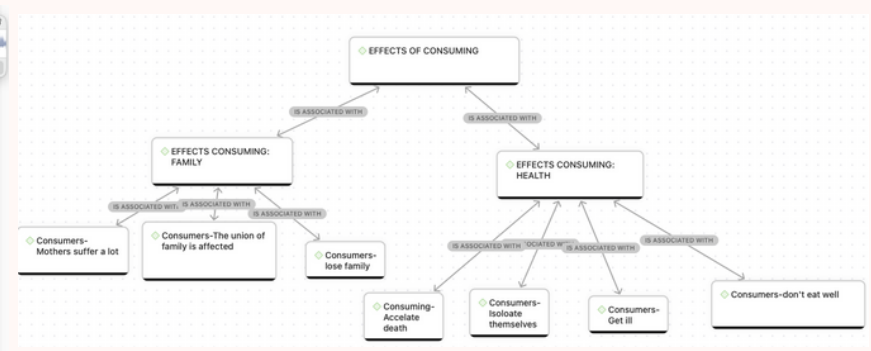
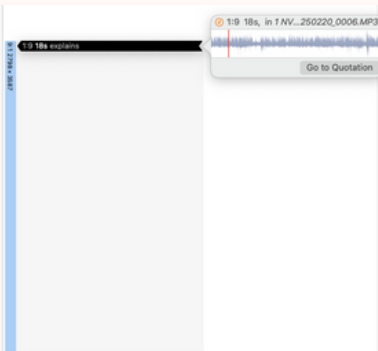
#### How is this related to our lives?

It's very relatable to our lives because we all reach a point where we're offered alcohol or substances to celebrate something and we feel the pressure to receive or want to consume just for the sake of it.

#### What can we do about it?

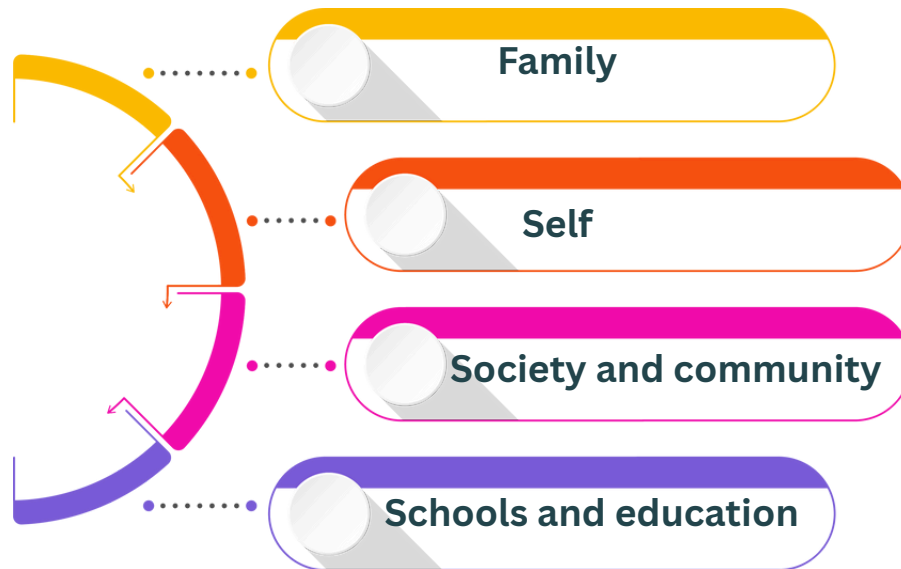
We can tell people in the community that there are different ways to celebrate important moments.

Additionally, we used the software for qualitative data analysis ATLAS.ti to analyze the images and the conversations. This allowed for a systematic process of producing findings and insights.



## EMERGENT THEMES

Emergent themes were categorized around four topics, all of which were represented in collages, drawings, performances, and the discussions that followed all activities. These are the following:



The following are key emerging themes around each one of these four topics:

### Family

Alcohol and drug consumption keeps youth who consume alcohol and drugs from appreciating and enjoying the family as a source of 'blessing' and support. Family bonding is sacrificed.

Younger siblings can be devastated when seeing the effect of consumption on older siblings. [One of the participants mentions the death of a sibling and the effect that had on the younger siblings']

When alcohol consumption becomes part of family life, a cycle of internal conflict emerges. For instance, when consumption happens in the weekends, there is an expectation that once a week tension will rise.

“

*...when in the family there is a person who is addicted, be it to your father or your mother or whoever, but they pretend in front of people that everything is fine, that nothing is happening, more so if there are blows, abuse and all that, that is, you try to hide inside what is happening, what they are suffering, so all this, for me this represents the truth of addictions and alcohol*

”

“

*Sometimes when there are addictions in that home, happiness ends in that family, there is no longer happiness in that home.*

”

## EMERGENT THEMES

When parents consume, that affects the children and the youngest in particular.

Sometimes the fear that installs on children when witnessing parents or older siblings consume serves as a protective factor that keeps away for alcohol and drugs. Participants call this “inherited fear”.

The family can play a key role in supporting recovery.

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*Because sometimes I feel that alcohol can change things, relationships whether between family or friends*

”

Alcohol and substance use disrupts family relations, as well as relationships with friends.

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*I think that alcohol destroys the family, and they miss out on many things, if they have children, they miss out on their children's growth, nor on many things that sometimes they don't notice, but even if they say I'm only going to go for a weekend, but that weekend you've already missed the light of peace in your family and only because of alcohol and drugs, and I have seen many cases of people who are drug addicts and it is very, very bad because they get to the point of going crazy and they no longer know their family, they get to beat their own parents because of drugs and alcohol. I also know many people who for I don't know what problems maybe sometimes they don't know how to solve them and they take everything as if to solve it in alcohol, because they don't know what to do, they only drink well and this. They don't know how to express themselves, not with whom, and they take refuge in alcohol and drugs.*

”

## Self

Substance use is seen as a consequence of feeling isolated, even in people who may seem to have a functional family.

At the same time, consuming alcohol and substances is seen as a way of hiding from reality:

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*...it is like a way to sometimes hide what we really are and how sometimes we can start using alcohol and drugs, as an escape to not face reality.*

”

Alcohol and substance use affects study and work habits, eating habits, sleeping habits, and family and social relations.

“

*In your personal life, your routine can be disrupted, and connections can be broken, whether it's with family or friends, or even at work or school. Someone can hurt someone who may be important to you.*

”

“

*"... someone who comes from another country. And they come here to work, it's very different from someone who already lived here and then went to college and then has their 9-to-5, and then can be doing whatever they want to do. But then if someone just comes to work, then it's harder to find those activities that aren't just drinking or something like that."*

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## EMERGENT THEMES

### Society and Community

It is easy to access alcohol even as underage. Laws are not respected.

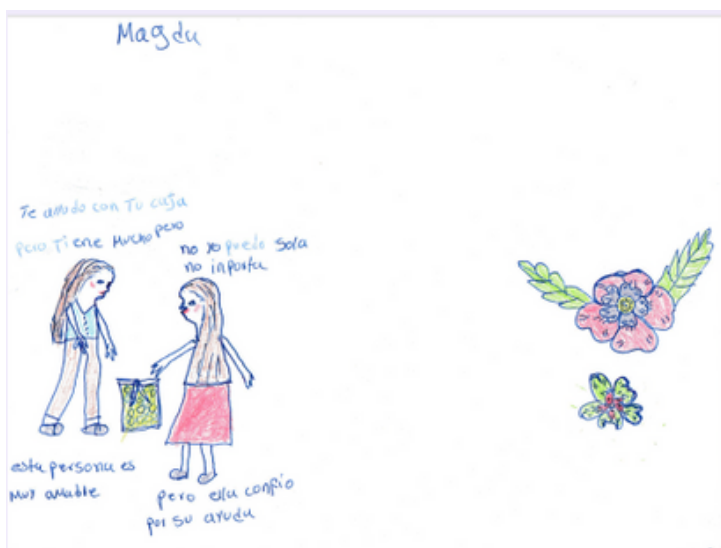
In Albany parks it is common to see people smoking, making it uncomfortable for families:

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*There are children who suffer from asthma, and you go to the park and you take your children and they're playing, but then they start coughing. And those people who are also unconscious are also dangerous in the park. Once, I had to go to the park with my daughter, and a man came out of nowhere and started hitting the whole playground,...*

”

Community is also a source of support and a protective factor against alcohol and substance use. Sources of trust in friends.



Alcohol use is legitimized in society through media and socially accepted celebrations. There is a fine line between drinking in celebrations, and using celebrations as an excuse for drinking.

Alcohol is ‘romanticized’ through media and marketed as something desirable and celebratory: A bottle of alcohol as the ‘perfect gift’.

“

*yo siento que hay muchas personas que se sienten presionados a tomar y a beber cuando obviamente en las fiestas, con amigos, cuando hay muchos Adultos, pues muchas personas que se sienten presionados a tomar*

”

Open conversations about alcohol and drug use are necessary. This can help with developing awareness about what truly matters in life and about the harsh consequences of consuming, such as homelessness and even death.

Community-based organizations like ANDARES are best positioned to provide a space for communication and support because they speak the same language,

“

*Even if the organization does not have the resources needed, they will help find those resources.*

*A flyer on prevention resources was given to me in the English language, and I could not read it. But ANDARES speaks our language.*

”



## EMERGENT THEMES

### Schools and Education

There is a need for better education on alcohol and drug use focused on prevention and on its effects. Participants expressed that they did not learn enough in high school.

More information and resources need to be provided at schools.

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*I think it was important but we also need a change of system because when I went to high school they hardly taught about this and I knew of many people who died or are on the streets because of drugs and there is no system to help.”*

”

“

*I've already looked at many things because I don't think they teach much here, but in Mexico they do. There's a two-hour class at the end where they teach you about this and show you how they look and what they do.*

”

Schools (as well as churches) can help people who feel disconnected and isolated. Need for mutual support initiatives in these settings.

Many times teachers are better positioned than parents to identify when a child is consuming alcohol or drugs.

Education on alcohol and drug use can be sometimes fear-based. This can be counter-productive.

There is the need for more collaborative work between organizations and schools on topics related to alcohol and drug use.

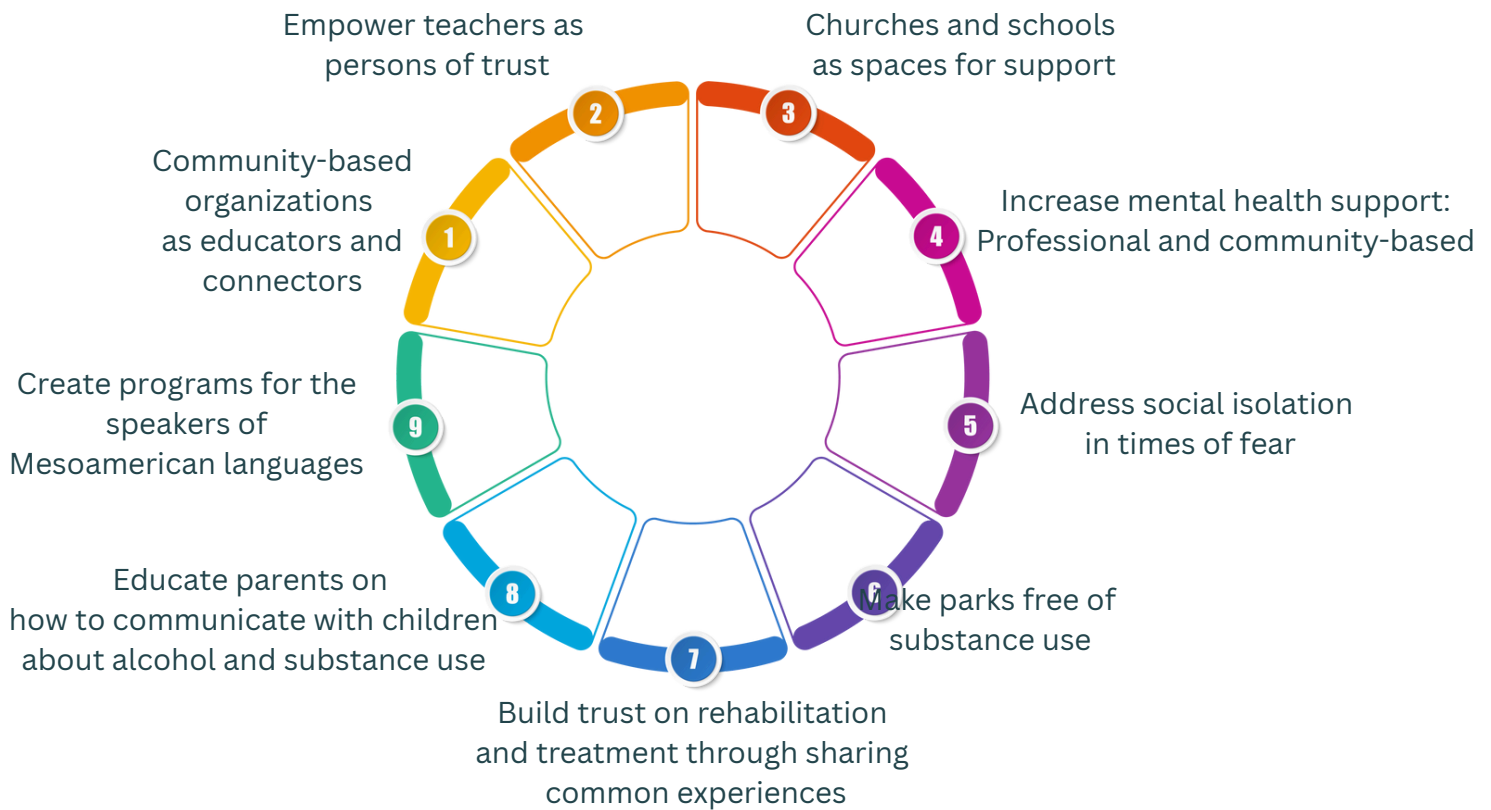
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*Teachers also need to realize that students are under a lot of stress from homework or work or things that happen in their lives, so that they can better help students.*

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## EMERGENT THEMES:

### Program and Policy Recommendations



#### **Culturally specific community-based organizations (CBOs) as educators and connectors.**

Participants describe culturally specific organizations as playing a key role in informing, educating, building mutual support, and sharing resources. They say that these organizations ‘speak the same language’ and therefore they feel close to them. Even if the organization does not provide direct assistance, they value that they make efforts to find resources and solutions.

**Empower teachers to become the person of trust.** This is based on the experience of a participant who had a teacher who became the person of trust, with whom this person would talk when in need. In this case, the teacher became a go-between the student and the parents. This requires significant sensibility and capacity to understand without judging. One of the participants said: “Parents do not always know or notice the changes their children are going through especially when they work the whole day and don’t have enough time to be with the children. The teachers are sometimes closer to the children than parents.

## **EMERGENT THEMES: Program and Policy Recommendations**

**Church and schools as places of support.** When families go to church, that institution can become an important source of social support because that is where they find people who have a similar life experience as well as people they trust. One of the participants referred to the church as the place they would go if they had a child going through alcohol or substance use issues. Schools can also play that role, particularly if there is a trusted person there.

**Increase mental health support: Professional services and community-based initiatives.** In general, it is well known that there is space for improving the quantity of mental health support services in the Spanish language. Support is needed for youth as well as parents. The ANDARES team proposes that efforts be made at two levels: increase the availability of Spanish language mental health professionals, and implement community-based projects that provide the community spaces for building a) horizontal support networks, spaces for sharing common experiences, and b) establishing trusting relationships between the community and external organizations and agencies.

**Address social isolation in times of fear.** Related to mental health, participants describe isolation as a factor that leads to alcohol and substance use in youth. Isolation is particularly relevant among newcomers to the area when language is a barrier that makes integration difficult. Given the current political situation and the fear that is affecting the Latinx community regardless of immigration status because of risks of detention and deportation, there is an increasing concern that isolation may become more prevalent. Thus, it is important that efforts be made to create spaces where people can come together and develop relationships of trust with peers and with people from allied organizations. This is something that culturally specific organizations can do well, in partnership with health departments and other agencies.

**Make parks spaces free of alcohol and substance use.** Participants mentioned that they have had negative experiences in parks with people under the influence of substances. The implication of this is that more efforts should be made to make these public spaces welcoming for families.

**Build trust on rehabilitation and treatment programs through sharing experiences.** It helps when others who have been in those programs can share their experience as a way of raising awareness about the existence of these programs and how they have affected their lives. One of the participants said the following about this: “Well, listening to the experiences of others can help in the recovery process because many times these programs are not well understood.”

## EMERGENT THEMES:

### Program and Policy Recommendations

**Educate parents on communication strategies with children about alcohol and substance use.** Participants referred to a gap that sometimes exists between parents and children regarding communication on topics related to alcohol and substance use. This relates to what participants describe as the social acceptance of alcohol consumption at home, in parties and celebrations, and the impact that has on younger children. Parent education efforts should take into consideration the culturally sanctioned role that alcohol consumption plays in their culture.

**Create programs for speakers of Mesoamerican languages.** Although not mentioned by participants, there is one immigrant community that is normally hidden under the ‘Latino/x’ label. That is the Mam speaking community from Guatemala. For members of this community (and other Mesoamerican languages) the Spanish is their second language. Efforts need to be made to improve outreach in that community, at schools, churches, and ‘tiendas’ (small businesses). ANDARES is starting to reach out to this community through its OHA-funded Protecting Oregon Farmworkers project, but more needs to be done.

## CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS





**The value of action-research.** The action-research approach we have chosen for this project has allowed us to provide information on resources to the group at the same time as they express their points of view about alcohol and substance.

**Art allows to express what spoken words cannot say.** The fact that we complemented art with conversations, has allowed for a rich exploration of what is meaningful for participants.

**The intense approach we have taken allows not only to produce insights but, most significantly, it allows to build community.** Although this approach requires more time and a richer methodology than for example a focus group, the benefit of it is that the insights that are produced are the result of in-depth individual and group reflection, and that participants become a collective with the potential of further engaging in producing change in their communities.

**The Latino community needs spaces for engagement.** In such spaces they express themselves freely, recognize and celebrate their strengths, and build a common vision of what is important for them.

**Next, we want to engage this and other groups in a process of asset-based mapping** through which they map their community according to their own life experience, identifying existing organizations, resources, and spaces, and associating to them their own stories.

**Next, we want to engage this and other groups in action planning and implementation:** They will actively participate in deciding what needs to improve, how the community can contribute to creating solutions, and in implementing those solutions.