



Success Story from Blue Cross Funded Organizations

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Fruit Bowl: An Annual Tobacco and Alcohol-free Event to Celebrate Pride Season



Overview

In June 2008, the Rainbow Health Initiative (RHI) launched its first Fruit Bowl for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) communities in the Twin Cities. Promoted as “An tobacco and alcohol-free event to celebrate Pride,” the Fruit Bowl coincided with the 2008 Twin Cities Pride Festival, and was held at Elsie’s Restaurant, Bar and Bowling Center in Northeast Minneapolis, and has become an annual RHI signature event.

Prior to the Fruit Bowl, the Twin Cities Pride Festival (referred to simply as “Pride”) included a number of events —such as a boat cruise, art shows, block parties, and a parade—where the presence of tobacco and alcohol is pervasive, and seen in two ways: as consumer products designed and culturally marketed to appeal to LGBTQ communities, and as important sources of sponsorship that help cover the high costs associated with Pride events.

For RHI, the absence of a tobacco and alcohol-free Pride event was indicative of the impact on and the broader social acceptance of chemical substances within LGBTQ communities. Notes Loretta Worthington, RHI’s Executive Director:

“A large portion of the LGBTQ community is in recovery and/or does not want to be around tobacco or alcohol. We wanted to honor that by creating a fun and affirming space where LGBTQ communities can still feel included within the larger Pride celebrations, in an environment free of any chemical substances.”



...the Fruit Bowl is recognized as part of a myriad of “community events” celebrating the spirit of Twin Cities Pride and Pride Season in general.

Fruit Bowl: At a Glance

Since its inaugural year in 2008, the Fruit Bowl is held annually at Elsie’s Restaurant, Bar & Bowling Center—a privately owned business in the Northeast neighborhood of Minneapolis. Although not produced by the Twin Cities Pride organization—RHI and its partners plan and run the event—the Fruit Bowl is recognized as part of a myriad of “community events” celebrating the spirit of Twin Cities Pride and Pride Season in general.

Fruit Bowl offers LGBTQ communities and their allies a chemical-free gathering space where they can enjoy a rich combination of social and educational experiences. Bowling, dining, makeup artistry, massage therapy, and drawing prizes are among the festive attractions offered to attendees of all ages. Also available are important educational resources focused on the health and wellness of LGBTQ communities. These include booths from organizing members and sponsors (furnished with brochures, fact sheets, referral tools, etc.), outreach workers communicating about their work, and a series of different health factoids and statistics projected onto a large screen in the dining room. In addition, RHI utilizes Fruit Bowl as an avenue for administering their annual LGBTQ Health Assessment, an instrument designed to increase the knowledge base on the health needs and priorities of LGBTQ communities in Minnesota.

Getting Started – Filling the Bowl with Fruit

Identifying & Engaging Partners

After outlining the vision and goals of Fruit Bowl, the next step for RHI was to identify partners and potential event organizers supportive of LGBTQ communities and concerned about their health and wellness. The Tobacco-free Lavender Communities of Minnesota (TLC) seemed a natural fit to initiate and coordinate planning for Fruit Bowl. As the statewide collaborative of grassroots citizens and agencies concerned about the high prevalence of tobacco use in LGBTQ communities in Minnesota, the linkage also made sense from a strategic perspective: RHI was one of the original founders of TLC, and as its lead organizer, devoted considerable efforts cultivating its membership base. PRIDE Institute, a substance abuse residential recovery home for LGBTQ people, stepped up as our first organizational partner and continues to be involved today.

To help ensure the success of Fruit Bowl—particularly in its first year—RHI also sought partnerships beyond the agencies traditionally affiliated with TLC. Executive Director, Loretta Worthington, met with a number of organizations to pitch the vision and goals of the event, subsequently bringing on additional players, such as Neighborhood Involvement Programs (a Minneapolis multi-service agency with a health clinic and counseling center), Lavender Magazine, and Meridian Behavioral Health.

Bringing Diverse Resources to the Table

In addition to the funding needed to cover the operational expenses associated with Fruit Bowl, the event organizers and its supporters also contributed a variety of other resources, such as the time and skills of multiple staff members, advertising capabilities, and connections with volunteers.

Supporting organizations were also indispensable in mobilizing a core group of dedicated volunteers, who helped spread the word about Fruit Bowl to their families, friends and colleagues, as well as assisting with logistics (e.g., set up, coordination, clean up, etc.) on the day of the event.





Creating a Substance-free Zone

As with the identification of potential organizers and supporters, RHI was interested in partnering with a bowling venue that would support the vision of a substance-free Pride event for LGBTQ communities. Other selection criteria for Fruit Bowl involved pragmatic and logistic considerations, such as affordability, geographic accessibility to the target audience, audio-visual capacities, and spatial features, such as the size and number of available event rooms (needed to accommodate the range of planned activities), and the location of the designated outdoor spaces in relation to the event areas. Elsie's Restaurant, Bar and Bowling Center was chosen as the site of Fruit Bowl in 2008, after expressing support of its vision and their willingness to accommodate the needs of a substance-free gathering. Due to its success in the first year, the partnership continued in 2009 and 2010.

In creating the substance-free zone for Fruit Bowl, Loretta Worthington worked with Elsie's management to ensure that the sale and consumption of tobacco and alcohol were restricted from all event spaces. Smokers were required to use designated outdoor smoking sections, and alcohol was limited to the restaurant, which was completely separated from the banquet area and bowling lanes.

In terms of Fruit Bowl's impact on Elsie's, one staff member exclaimed:

"It's fun working with the [LGBTQ] community in this special event. They bring a lot of people in that I don't ordinarily get to see, and they all seem to just be here to have a good time. No one drinks too much, plus, all the bowling lanes are used."

Challenges

Managing Unknown Dynamics

RHI, TLC, and their partners approached Fruit Bowl without the benefit of a similar example in Minnesota, requiring the event organizers to carefully navigate around several unknown variables. Given the plethora of existing Pride-related events, creating something new and unique like Fruit Bowl can present a number of risks.

One challenge that Fruit Bowl organizers faced came on the night of the event itself. Originally, 80 participants were anticipated in terms of turnout, and the amount of staffing, meals, and other resources were apportioned to accommodate that number. Exceeding their initial expectations, an audience of 350 showed up instead, overwhelming their initial capacity to adequately serve this larger crowd. The relationship with Elsie's proved invaluable when they came up with a buffet of food to feed everyone at the event, and RHI staff and volunteers worked to ensure that everyone had a chance to bowl, win prizes, participate in karaoke, or eat a good meal. While this demonstrated the LGBTQ communities' enthusiasm and support for a tobacco and alcohol-free event, it likewise proved the value of implementing a system in advance to respond to unexpected circumstances.

Another unknown variable that occurred during the night of Fruit Bowl specifically involved airflow from the outside to the event spaces within. The outside areas that were designated by the business solely for smoking did not directly face the windows of the event spaces, and were therefore considered sufficiently removed from the areas occupied by Fruit Bowl. However, whenever the wind blew towards those windows, it carried with it the tobacco smoke from the outside. The incident pointed to the need to account for extraneous factors (like the wind) when negotiating the designated smoke areas, in order to completely remove the threat of second-hand smoke. This was counteracted in 2009 and 2010 by moving the designated smoking areas elsewhere.



RHI cultivated relationships with a cross-section of organizations, groups, and businesses to strengthen the planning process and increase resources for Fruit Bowl.



Lessons Learned

Develop a Strategic Vision

RHI was guided by several considerations in envisioning Fruit Bowl. First was the aim of creating a tobacco and alcohol-free event as an alternative to many of the existing Pride celebrations, where those substances are present. Next, they recognized the popularity of bowling within LGBTQ communities in MN, and saw an opportunity to use this as a venue for a fun, substance-free Pride event. Finally, they combined social and recreational elements for networking and celebratory purpose, along with educational resources to promote health and wellness in LGBTQ communities.

Mix Fun with Learning

Health fairs and similar educational events often serve a small portion of LGBTQ communities. To expand reach and effectiveness with audiences, combine fun activities with traditional educational approaches. Through bowling, dining, karaoke, and other recreational choices, attendees were able to network and celebrate the spirit of Pride in a healthy, substance-free atmosphere. They were also exposed to opportunities to learn about health issues affecting the LGBTQ community, and resources to address those issues.

One Fruit Bowl participant noted that he appreciated the hybrid approach:

“I’m a biology/pre-med student, and I just came here with my friend to eat and bowl; I didn’t intend to learn anything tonight. But I liked having all the health facts on the large screen. I didn’t know a lot of that stuff about our community.”

Reflect on Past Successes & Challenges

Loretta Worthington strongly recommends reviewing previous annual events, reflecting on successes and challenges, and using those insights to inform planning for subsequent years of implementation. For her, the pilot year is especially instructive in setting a baseline for what to anticipate in terms of funding, staff and volunteer needs, meals and snacks, resources and referral needs, and environmental factors that may unexpectedly occur.

Engage Diverse Partners

RHI cultivated relationships with a cross-section of organizations, groups, and businesses to strengthen the planning process and increase resources for Fruit Bowl. They looked internally at existing linkages, including TLC and its members of nonprofit tobacco control allies, associations and businesses. They then expanded beyond the coalition, forming relationships with LGBTQ-friendly businesses, mainstream LGBTQ organizations, and other nonprofits. Through this diverse body of planners and supporters, Fruit Bowl received resources such as funding, the expertise and dedication of its organizers, connections with volunteers, and other in-kind support.

Rainbow Health Initiative receives training and technical assistance through the Technical Assistance for Priority Populations to Implement a Norm Change on Tobacco (TAPP INTO) program. The TAPP INTO Program is a comprehensive community-competent technical assistance and training program that supports community organizations working with African, African American, Latino, LGBT, and Southeast Asians in Minnesota. The goal of the TAPP INTO program is to build the capacity of these priority population-serving organizations in Minnesota and their emerging coalitions to implement successful tobacco control programs and policies and eventually reduce tobacco prevalence, exposure to secondhand smoke, and other tobacco disparities. This work is supported by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota (Blue Cross) as part of a health improvement initiative funded by tobacco settlement dollars that addresses root causes of preventable heart disease and cancer. Blue Cross’ prevention efforts with high priority populations include a commitment to build community capacity to work on health promotion efforts.