How does the program operate?

The Management of Alcohol program provides a maximum of a 5 oz serving of wine between the hours of 8 am to 10 pm to participants in the program. Currently there is space for 28 participants at a time and a waiting list is being kept. Staff of the program manages the alcohol intake for participants to insure that they are not dangerously impaired and that they remain in a safe environment while under the influence of alcohol. Participants in the Management of Alcohol program live at the shelter and are served their meals in the program. A client care worker from the Ottawa Inner City Health is available each day to assist clients with nutrition, hygiene, health needs and medications. Nurses and doctors visit periodically to assess and treat participants. Participants are encouraged to seek health care from family doctors, specialists and the hospitals, as their health problems would indicate.

Who is eligible for admission to the Management of Alcohol program?

Clients can be accepted for admission to the program if they meet the following criteria:

- Long history of “street drinking” which has been unresponsive to addictions treatment and which poses a serious health risk to the individual
- Complex health problems, which are not being addressed due to alcohol use
- Frequent user of emergency services (police, ambulance, emergency)
- Cause concern in the community due to alcohol related behaviors

How does the admission happen?

If a client is accepted for admission, the program is explained to the client and they are allowed to try to program for a few days before deciding if they want to be formally admitted. Clients who are admitted must consent to participate in the Ottawa Inner City Health. This means that they must consent to

- Comply with the “house rules” which are set in partnership by staff and the other clients in the program
- Consent to participate in health care provided by a team of health care professionals
- Contribute $100 of their $118 personal needs allowance toward the cost of alcohol.

The client is able to participate in the program for approximately six weeks. At that point, a formal decision on continued participation is made based on an interview with the client and a team meeting with the staff. There is no time limit on how long the client can stay in the program provided they continue to benefit from participation.
How do you measure “success” for the clients in the Management of Alcohol program?

The client is expected to stabilize their alcohol intake. They must comply with very modest expectations in terms of nutrition and personal hygiene. They must comply with the planned medical care. Success is defined by the improvement in quality of life and function experienced by the client. Many clients are admitted with a terminal illness and success for these clients is defined by their cooperation in managing pain and other symptoms. Again, quality of life is the most important indicator of success. Reduced cost to the community in terms of use of emergency services is another indicator of success.

Is the Management of Alcohol program causing more harm than good?

Ottawa Inner City Health Inc. has undertaken a formal evaluation of the program, which demonstrated positive health outcomes for participants and significant cost savings to taxpayers.

Are clients in the program drinking more than before?

Clients are expected to reduce their intake of alcohol to the amount supplied by the program. Clients who leave to drink other alcohol are not served wine when they return. If staff believe a client is actually drinking more in the program than previously, we will negotiate a more suitable schedule with the client or they may be asked to leave the program if they persist in excessive alcohol intake.

What is the program able to do when a client decides to reduce his/her consumption of alcohol?

Clients who decide to reduce alcohol consumption have a number of options. Some have left the program and gone to a “dry” environment. Some clients have opted to reduce the number of ounces of wine served per hour or the frequency of servings. Clients are not required to continue to drink to participate in the program.

How does the program help to reduce harm?

Joseph was referred to the program by staff at another shelter. He was well known in the community and had been drinking daily for more than 20 years. Staff were concerned that his tolerance for alcohol was decreasing at the same time as his intake was increasing. During the summer and fall, staff was called out daily by resident and local business owners in the community to take him back when he passed out in their yards and on the sidewalk. Staff was concerned that he could not survive the winter, as he would freeze to death outside. Joseph was a welcome addition to the program as he was already a friend with many of the participants. His consumption of alcohol stabilized and he quickly started to take an interest in his health, better nutrition, good
hygiene and self-care. He has begun to read, draw and organize card tournaments among residents. He has not had any visits to hospital or interactions with police since entering the program. He has been successfully treated for ulcers, an infection and has applied for and received ODSP. Joseph is amazed at his own progress and feels he would not be alive if he had not been given the chance to participate in the Management of Alcohol program.

Why don't you offer the same kind of program for drug users?

Based on the experience in Europe with injecting rooms we recognize that drug users would likely benefit from this kind of programming. However, we are only funded to provide a Management of Alcohol program at this time. Drug use is illegal and would pose greater challenges to operate.

What is wrong in promoting abstinence?

There is nothing wrong with abstinence. However, this particular group of clients has demonstrated repeatedly that it is not a viable option for them at this point in their lives. The program offers them support in managing their alcohol intake so they can improve other areas of their lives. These clients are more than just people who drink too much alcohol; they have talents, relationships and responsibilities. The Management of Alcohol program gives them an opportunity to become “themselves” again.

Are you offering any kind of recreational programs to help the clients?

Developing recreational activities for these clients has been a major challenge for us because of the space we operate in. Many of the clients have significant physical and cognitive impairments, which eliminate participation in some activities. Clients do enjoy reading, arts and crafts, picnics and other outings. What we have focused on is restoring responsibility for self-care and good citizenship. The clients prepare their own food, provide the majority of cleaning and laundry services and are expected to volunteer either in or outside the program. Many clients volunteer in the main shelter at Shepherds of Good Hope or in the soup kitchen. Clients are expected to behave in a socially acceptable manner inside and outside the program. They are prohibited from drinking outside the program, panhandling, or other public nuisance behaviors. Failure to comply with these expectations may lead to serious consequences including being asked to leave the program. The participants in the program are very proud of their program and their capacity for “civilized behavior” and insist on setting high expectations for themselves.