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Marin health nonprofit gets \$1M state grant to aid youths

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Alcohol Justice, a nonprofit in San Rafael, has received a \$1 million grant from the California Department of Health Care Services as part of a youth substance-use prevention program funded by taxes on recreational cannabis.

Alcohol Justice was awarded the grant to “promote the leadership of Latinx youth of the Canal district of San Rafael and Marin County by understanding indigenous and Latinx cultural practices, community organizing and hands-on environmental projects to prevent substance use,” the state said in its funding announcement.

Alcohol Justice was one of 61 community and tribal organizations that received a total of \$58.5 million in grants in the latest round of funding announced this fall. To date, 239 organizations statewide have received funding aimed at preventing youth substance use as the result of taxes on recreational cannabis.

The Department of Health Care Services awards the money through a program known as “Elevate Youth California.” The department says the program “implements youth-led social justice, mentoring, and peer support programs for youth ages 12 to 26 living in low-income, under-resourced communities of color disproportionately impacted by the war on drugs.”

According to the program’s website, “Adult allies guiding Elevate Youth California-funded programs recognize that the war on drugs is a direct result of systemic racism, which has led to inequity in health systems and criminalization of youth in low-income communities and communities of color.”

In its grant proposal, Alcohol Justice wrote, “Latinos in Marin County suffered unduly from the war on drugs: from 2009 to 2018 Latinx juveniles were 16% of the juvenile population of Marin County, but were arrested for 39% of the drug offenses and felonies and 41% of misdemeanors.”

Formed in 1987 as one of the original projects of the Buck Trust, Alcohol Justice advocates for changes in alcohol corporations and alcohol policies to keep youths and communities healthy. In 2022, \$1.4 million of its \$2.1 million budget came from the Buck Trust, which is managed by the Marin Community Foundation.

Alcohol Justice’s \$1 million grant, which it will receive over a three-year period, will allow for expansion of the nonprofit’s Youth for Justice program.

“Youth for Justice is an interdisciplinary program for Latino kids that empowers them and supports them,” said Maite Duran, the program’s director for nearly a decade.

Youth for Justice focuses on four areas: health and healing; connecting kids with nature; educating youths about the culture and history of Latino and Indigenous people; and community organizing “to prevent alcohol and other harm.”

“We know that Latino kids face isolation, sadness and depression and othering in the schools,” Duran said. “So, we introduce them to self-care and caring for others as part of our responsibility of caring for one another and mother earth.”

The program doesn’t explicitly discourage the use of alcohol and other drugs by talking about associated health risks, addiction or the danger of getting caught up in the criminal justice system. However, Duran said, “we consider everything that we do to be substance use prevention.”

“Because you can say ‘don’t do this’ all you want, but that doesn’t do anything if you don’t offer something as an alternative,” Duran said.

“In whatever area we study, we find how our ancestors dealt with this,” Duran said. “If you were to investigate the health of pre-colonial people, there was no addiction. Substances were prevalent but they were used with a sense of respect for the substance.”

Youth for Justice offers a different program every day of the week in areas such as gardening, cooking, criminal justice and leadership. It also sponsors monthly community cleanup efforts as well as a summer academy for kids.

In recognition that high taxes on recreational cannabis are making it difficult for authorized retailers to compete with the black market, the state has suspended its cannabis cultivation tax and frozen the cannabis excise tax at 15% until June 30, 2025.

“We’re in a situation where it is almost impossible for especially small operators to compete with illicit ones,” said Ellen Komp of California NORML, a nonprofit cannabis advocacy. “We should be taking a very close look at where all the tax money is going.”

The state also enacted a law requiring the Department of Health Care Services to begin submitting reports to the Legislature accounting for how tax revenue earmarked for the prevention of youth substance abuse are being spent.