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# June Focus Groups Report

Prepared for:  
**Rock Sober**



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## ROCK SOBER PARTICIPANTS FOCUS GROUP—INTRODUCTION

### Introduction

Rock Sober is “an alternative approach to achieving, maintaining, and supporting sobriety among young people,” as noted in the program’s introductory materials. Rock Sober was started in Brainerd, Minnesota in August, 2002. It is a program within Youth Services of Lutheran Social Services.

In July, 2002 Rock Sober received a SIG grant from the State of Minnesota, to expand as a demonstration project of innovative chemical dependency prevention and early intervention. Program staff, with the assistance of UpFront Consulting, developed an evaluation plan intended to assess progress toward program outcomes.

Focus groups with Rock Sober participants were included in the evaluation plan, as one method for gathering information about the program’s impact as well as youth satisfaction with Rock Sober. A first focus group was held with Rock Sober participants in October 2002.

This summary reports findings from two focus groups held June 2002 and July 2002, as part of two regularly scheduled support meetings. Youth who attend the Rock Sober group were invited to participate in a focus group. Generally different youth attend the weekly Monday and Wednesday groups, although they are welcome at each session.

The focus group was facilitated by Dianne Tuff and observed and tape recorded by Murdoch Johnson, who also took notes on a laptop. Dianne and Murdoch are the outside evaluation team for Rock Sober.

### Participants

A total of ten youth participated in the two focus

groups—four males and one female in the first group, and three males and two females—one of whom attended the first group also—in the second. In addition, a new female staff member who has been a Rock Sober member for eighteen months attended both groups. Two other staff members welcomed the participants, then left the room during the focus group to encourage participants to be open and honest.

Most participants live in or near Brainerd. Three live in Baxter, one in Little Falls. Most of these youth are younger than those who attended the focus group in October 2002. The program originally attracted youth who were mostly between ages 15 and 20. Now most Rock Sober participants are under age 18.

Youth in Rock Sober move through four stages along their path to sobriety. Participants nominate each other, or can nominate themselves, to move to the next stage after having met specified criteria. Stones with a carving of the animal that represents that stage are given to youth as they make the level change. The first totem is Otter, then Wolf, Bear, and finally Eagle. To attain Eagle status the youth must have been sober for at least one year.

Two participants in the focus group indicated they are at the Otter stage and have been part of Rock Sober for less than two months. Four have earned their Wolf totem and have participated for three to seven months. Three are Bears who have been members five to eight months, and one is an Eagle who was an original member of Rock Sober in 2002. The new staff member has attained Eagle status as well. She added her comments as a participant along with other youth.

## ROCK SOBER PARTICIPANTS FOCUS GROUP—FINDINGS

### What participants like about Rock Sober

Participants were asked to describe what is positive about Rock Sober, what they like about being a member. Everyone in both groups agreed that having a group of peers to talk with who they know will understand their situation is an important benefit of being a Rock Sober member.

Some participants also named the support they feel from others in the group. And some said they really like the alternative high activities they do together. The activities help them realize they can occupy their time and have fun without chemicals.

Other things members like about the program:

- Feeling safe and comfortable;
- Feeling accepted;
- Something to do that is not boring; and
- It keeps us out of trouble.

A few members described their experience of a good day at Rock Sober:

- Being able to talk about issues and be listened to;
- Getting support from members when the day has been rough;
- Getting feedback and help with a problem;
- Having a large group attend the support group and share ideas; and
- Feeling special when a new totem is earned.

#### Quotes

“A good day for me is when I have something to say, and being listened to. They know what I’m talking about, they understand what I’m saying.”

#### Quotes (cont.)

“When I first turned into an Otter, that felt special. It feels like other people know me enough to make me an Otter.”

“It’s a good day when I feel comfortable enough that I can sit here and cry and say whatever I want.”

“When we have activities, it feels good that you don’t have to do drugs to have fun.”

“Acceptance...no matter who you are or who is here in the group, you are accepted.”

### Satisfaction: How Rock Sober makes a difference

Rock Sober provides a safe place for youth to go “to get away from the outside world,” one member said. Others in the group agreed that it “means a lot to have a place to go.” Members offer each other advice, share problems and possible solutions, and support each other. And participants agreed this is making a difference in their lives.

Some members agreed the program helps them avoid relapsing into drug use and other social problems. “You get a lot of feedback. They ride you hard when you’re thinking of doing something dumb,” one member said.

These Rock Sober participants agreed that they have met new friends who are also working on staying sober. This is a positive change in their lives, they said.

#### Quotes

“It does make a difference to have someplace to go to talk, to have someone listen, to get some advice. We use each other for that stuff.”

“It’s a good place just to help each other out and not relapse as much.”

“Here I’m keeping my mind focused on things I need to do, staying off drugs and not getting in trouble with the law.”

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### *Quotes (cont.)*

"I don't get into trouble as much as I used to. Before about three times a month I'd be in trouble over little things. Now it's easier to avoid that, knowing I have somewhere to go."

"I don't need Rock Sober as much now as I did when I was 16 or 17. I don't know if the program has changed, but I've changed. Rock Sober helped me change."

### **Feelings about specific program components**

#### *Rock Sober meetings*

Both groups generally agreed that the group meetings are helpful and meet their needs for communication, support and feedback, as noted earlier. The sessions also "fill our time," one said. Another added, "It's a good use of time." They explained that it is important to have their time occupied with something other than using drugs.

In each group participants contrasted the Rock Sober group to AA and NA. One group described Rock Sober as "free flowing" and added that members can talk about whatever they need. In the other group participants agreed that they have more opportunities to discuss problems and receive feedback and helpful advice here than at an AA or NA meeting. AA tends to attract primarily older adults, and the focus is often on drinking and drugs and the negative aspects of use. Rock Sober is specifically for youth, and it is positively focused on "getting off of use," participants agreed.

### *Quotes*

"You get the most feedback at these meetings...much more feedback than at AA or NA."

"People are more accepting here. At AA they all share their sob stories about use. We don't talk about use here. We talk about our problems and focus on getting off of use. We know how to drink so we don't need to talk about that."

### *Quotes (cont.)*

"Here we're all younger, in about the same age group. That helps because we understand each other."

#### *Counseling*

When asked about the one to one meetings with staff, participants in both groups indicated that this does not happen in a formal way at Rock Sober. Staff are viewed more as part of the group than as the leaders. They are available whenever a member needs to talk, youth in one group agreed.

Participants also explained they are more likely to contact another member for help than to call or locate a staff member. Most agreed they get the support they need from each other.

### *Quotes*

"We find staff to talk with when we need to. It works."

"I don't think about that as counseling...it's just talking and having someone listen and give advice."

#### *Guides*

Some participants have a formal guide, a longer term member who they can contact when they need to talk. Many are under the impression that members need to have a guide before they can move to the Wolf stage, the third totem. Others say that is no longer true. Most agree that having a guide or mentor is a helpful part of Rock Sober, even if it is an informal relationship between two members. It's important to have someone to contact, participants agreed.

The guide needs to be a person that the member is comfortable with. The program helps make the match, participants said, and one can change guides if it doesn't work out.

## ROCK SOBER PARTICIPANTS FOCUS GROUP—FINDINGS

### Quotes

“When you need someone you can call or talk with if something serious happens, you can call your guide.”

“It’s a back-up...if you feel like you’re falling down and wanting to use, you call your guide.”

### *Alternative highs, creative activities*

Most of these members have participated in alternative high activities offered by Rock Sober. They include cliff jumping, quarry and mine pits for rope swings and swimming, trips to parks in the area, going to movies together, and swimming at a local hotel pool. Other activities including baseball and white water rafting are scheduled for the summer. In the past members had access to a music studio with instruments and recording equipment. They could participate in and attend Friday night jam sessions. These creative activities are currently on hold, but some members hope they will resume soon.

Participants described their enjoyment of the alternative highs in very positive terms. They relish the sense of freedom and adventure, describing the activities as “fun” and “different.”

### Quotes

“It feels good to have fun and not use drugs.”

“It gives me a way to keep busy and have fun too.”

“Alternative highs are great because we learn that we don’t have to do drugs to be cool.”

### **Impact of Rock Sober**

Participants described what they have learned through being a part of Rock Sober:

- Better communication skills
- To be confident
- That people care
- That not using can gain you respect

- How to have fun while not using.

Most members in one group and a few in the other agreed that, since attending Rock Sober, they feel more self confident, especially about their ability to maintain their sobriety and about their relationships with others. They attribute this change to their focus on getting sober, and they hear from others around them that they seem to be doing better.

When asked whether Rock Sober has had an impact on their relationship with adults, more than half of the participants described improvement in relationships with a parent or other adults. The change is a mutual respect and trust that was lacking in the past, these members agreed.

Rock Sober’s impact on member sobriety was evident in comments early in the focus group about things they like about the program. Many described Rock Sober as a place to spend time positively, in place of drinking or using drugs. The support and help participants receive from their sober peers helps them stay sober. A few members mentioned other influences on their sobriety beyond Rock Sober:

- Supportive parents,
- Watching the effect of use on other youth,
- Going through a treatment program, and
- Staying at the Baxter Youth Shelter.

### Quotes

“When you’re not doing drugs, you feel better about yourself. People recognize that you’re doing better too, that you’re more in control, going straight instead of down.”

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### *Quotes (cont.)*

"I feel more confident because I'm more focused on getting sober."

"Adults respect me a lot more and I respect them a lot more. I get along with them more than I used to."

"If adults have heard of Rock Sober and think highly of the program, then they think better of you for being part of it."

"My sobriety came at the same time as my mom's. We gained a lot of trust and respect. My mom knows I'm not out getting drunk and screwing around."

"My house parents respect me more. I have a close relationship with them now. They trust me better because of how I've changed."

"It's partly Rock Sober, partly watching my friends be stupid, and partly seeing what's happening to my parents that's keeping me sober."

"If you relapse, this program makes you think about what you've done...makes you feel guilty. You get really mad about it."

### **Impact on academics**

All of these Rock Sober members are high school students, except for the new staff member who will start college in the fall. Only one participant feels that Rock Sober has had a positive impact on his school attendance and grades. Education is not a topic of discussion at Rock Sober unless a member brings up a problem.

Some of the participants are either thinking about going to college, or have definite plans for college. One has reservations about college life because he feels it will be "hard to stay away from parties at college."

### **Community involvement**

The facilitator asked participants whether their community involvement has changed since they became Rock Sober members. A majority agreed that through Rock Sober they do more community service than they have in the past. Most have been involved in projects to clean up the city, picking up the highway, and planning a bar

because for the community.

They do not feel more a part of the community since attending Rock Sober, however.

### *Quotes*

"It feels like we're the outcasts in the community."

"The community is always looking for the wrongs. Even when we do community-building, they don't notice. They only pay attention when we screw up."

"Rock Sober is not as well-known as it could be. That might help the community accept us."

### **Suggestions to improve Rock Sober**

When asked what participants wish was different about the program, and what they would do differently if they were in charge, many made suggestions about the building space. In both groups there was general agreement that a bigger space is needed, and that it should be Rock Sober space all of the time, rather than shared with Outreach as it is now. Outreach is open to any youth, while Rock Sober is specifically for youth who are working on staying sober.

The program should be open more hours, participants in one group generally agreed. Volunteers could be recruited to staff it beyond the regular meeting times, they suggested. They would prefer to have a drop in space that was just for Rock Sober members. Both groups suggested Rock Sober needs to be better known, so that more youth will attend.

With a larger number of youth as members, there would be more opportunities to meet in different age groups, participants in one group agreed. Older members feel frustrated by behaviors of the younger members, especially their "lack of respect." Creating sub groups for part of the Rock Sober group time would improve the pro

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gram's effectiveness and support, by allowing older and younger members to meet separately sometimes.

Participants suggested ways of changing the facility:

- Find a bigger building that is further from the downtown bars
- Bathrooms within the Rock Sober space rather than next door in the E Cafe
- More furniture
- Food storage space and more food available for members
- Internet and satellite access
- A job opportunities bulletin board.

A couple participants offered some activity ideas as well: Going to Valley Fair, Mall of America, and Cart Country. "Those would be fun," some agreed.

### Quotes

"I'd feel more comfortable if we could have our own space. It needs to be separate from Outreach, with more time available for Rock Sober activities. Rock Sober is for help, Outreach is for fun."

"If we had a separate space, I think we'd have all sorts of kids interested in being part of Rock Sober...kids who are committed to sobriety and supportive of each other."

### Closing comments

The facilitator invited participants to make a final comment. Those who did had only positive things to say about Rock Sober.

### Quotes

"It's a cool place to hang out, and a good place to get your anger out."

"I don't get in trouble as long as I'm part of this."

### Quotes (cont.)

"It's a place to share your feelings and problems."

"Rock Sober has given me confidence and prepared me. I feel confident enough to leave for college. I know I'll be okay."

"It has been really helpful for me...a place where you can get help if you need it."

"Rock Sober offers a lot to individuals. It's not like AA, not their large numbers. But it really affects the individuals who choose to come here."