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**"STORIES THAT HEAL"  
THE CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT APPROACH TO PREVENTION  
OF VIOLENCE AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE;**

**APPLICATION FOR A GRANT TO SUPPORT THE FOUNDING CONVENTION  
OF THE CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT MOVEMENT.**

**By  
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The Cultural Environment Movement  
Philadelphia**

**in cooperation with**

**Webster University  
St. Louis**

## Abstract

This is an application on behalf of the Cultural Environment Movement (CEM), a nonprofit educational corporation, to help fund a conference to launch a national prevention coalition and program addressing media representations that sustain patterns of violence and substance abuse.

The theme of the conference is "Stories That Heal," and its title the Founding Convention of the Cultural Environment Movement. Invitations will be extended to CEM affiliates and other relevant groups, including national and local health promotion organizations, women's, minority and youth groups, advocacy groups in the public health field, media professionals and other citizen groups committed to the reduction and prevention of violence and substance abuse.

The conference will provide the first opportunity for representatives of affiliated organizations and other community leaders to meet, discuss, and reach agreement on priorities of action, strategies of dissemination, and future cooperation and coordination.

The conference will take place March 15-17, 1996, on the campus of its host and co-sponsors, Webster University, in St. Louis, Missouri.

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The proposed invitational conference will establish the Cultural Environment Movement (CEM), now receiving outreach support from CSAP, as the national coalition for preventive action on the cultural front. Affiliates of CEM include national and local health promotion organizations, women's, minority and youth groups, advocacy groups in the public health field, media professionals and other citizen groups and community leaders committed to reduction and prevention of violence and substance abuse.

**A. SPECIFIC AIMS**

The conference is designed to provide the first opportunity for representatives of affiliated organizations and other community leaders to meet, discuss, and reach agreement on priorities of action, strategies of dissemination, and future cooperation and coordination. A statement of principles, a "Declaration of Viewers, Independence", a published report, a newsletter, and a Coordinating Council of organizational representatives to follow up the action plan will be the concrete outcomes of the conference.

The conference theme, "Stories That Heal," will focus attention on media content and policies that support patterns of violence and substance abuse, and on strategies of changing them. The title "Founding Convention" and the "Declaration of Viewers, Independence" will recall the events of 1776 to suggest that it is time to address problems in the new cultural mainstream of America. The substantive content and plan of dissemination will build on prior research and activity in the field, including that conducted by the proponents and receiving current CSAP support.

The conference grant is requested to commence on August 1, 1995 and terminate on July 31, 1996. The conference itself will take place March 15-17, 1996, on the Webster University campus in St. Louis, Missouri. Webster University is the host and a co-sponsor of the conference.

The grant will help support conference planning, specified expenses of the conference, post-conference dissemination.

## B. BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Violence and substance abuse have been among the most pervasive and persistent social pathologies of our time. They continue to drain vital energies, undermine the sense of community and security, strain systems of law enforcement and justice, and destroy families, health and lives.

The predominant response has been reactive. We "pour resources into deterring and incapacitating...apprehending, arresting, adjudicating and incarcerating..." writes James A. Mercy of the Center for Injury Prevention and Control in the Winter 1993 issue of *Health Affairs*. And that approach, he concludes, "has not made an appreciable difference."

This proposal brings to fruition the initial phase of a new approach. It is based on the long-standing conclusion of the public health community, but especially of CSAP, that the new frontier of health promotion and disease prevention is the cultural frontier.

Most of what ails and kills us -- such as violence and the abuse of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs (ATOD) -- are culturally supported behavior patterns. Therefore, their reduction and prevention must address the nature and production of media images and messages support them.

The first major advance on that new frontier was the 1990 OSAP monograph *Youth and Drugs: Society's Mixed Messages*. That influential publication provided a basis for an approach encompassing the entire community, focusing on leadership and organizational collaboration, and searching for new ways to reach out to the most vulnerable populations.

Our first study, "Stories That Hurt; Tobacco, Alcohol and Other Drugs in the Mass Media," published as Chapter 3 in the 1990 OSAP monograph, observed that "How well and how long Americans live are no longer questions of medicine or fate. Preventable illness and premature death are now end products of a complex manufacturing and marketing process." Our subsequent report to CSAP, "Violence and Drugs on Television; The Cultural Environment Approach to Prevention," delivered in the fall of 1994, describes how

that process shapes the mainstream of the cultural environment, what are the implications for women, youth, minorities and other populations most at risk, and what policy implications flow from these findings.

The project on which that report was based also had a substantial outreach component. The report described the establishment the Cultural Environment Movement as a non-profit educational corporation to address the need for a new approach to prevention. CEM's main objective is reach out to communities and to build a coalition of independent organizations committed to joint action in developing mechanisms of greater public participation in cultural decision-making. A goal is greater freedom of creative people from some of the formulas imposed on them, in order to address problems in current representations of violence, substance abuse, and other aspects of physical and social well-being.

Soon after its establishment, CEM began to disseminate information through mailings, personal appearances, interviews, reports publications and regional meetings held in Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, Urbana, Ill., Fargo, N.D., Houston, Ashville, N.C., and Vancouver, B.C. and other locations.

The CEM database now holds names and addresses of over 3,000 individuals who wrote to request additional information, and more than 100 organizations expressing interest in affiliation or formally affiliating with CEM. New inquiries, membership forms, and expressions of interest are currently being received at the rate of approximately 10 a week.

The fall 1994 report to CSAP also presented a strategic plan that calls for the proposed conference. That conference will be the culmination of the first phase of CEM's outreach and dissemination efforts, and preparation for the next phase.

### C. APPROACH/METHOD

The conference will be called a "Founding Convention" because it will assemble for the first time representatives of affiliated organizations and potential affiliates, and will establish ground rules for the coalition.

The theme "Stories That Heal" will focus attention on the mass-produced and mass-marketed "stories that hurt," and hurt especially the most vulnerable populations, and on the need for changing the constraints and formulas driving their mass-production. The theme is based on research and publications supported by CSAP and conducted by the proponents and organizers of the conference.

The "Viewers' Declaration of Independence" will direct primary (though not exclusive) attention to the mainstream of contemporary culture, television. Television is the only medium that comes into the home. It is the mainstream of an historically new and coherent cultural environment that tells most of the stories to most of the people from cradle to grave. Its patterns of story-telling, common to most types of programs, are the "wholesale" producers of images and messages that sustain health-related (and other) behaviors. Any intervention on the "retail" level can only address symptoms but cannot begin to prevent their mass-production and discharge into the common cultural environment.

Another declaration of principles will be entitled "Healthy People: A Communication Charter." This will assert the right of a child to be born into a new cultural environment that is reasonably free, fair, diverse, and non-damaging.

The conference program includes (a) nationally