

Marin Independent Journal

Marin Voice: Alcohol Justice program keeps historic ties to Canal strong

By [Cruz Avila](#)

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Cruz Avila is executive director at Alcohol Justice (provided by Alcohol Justice)

As the son of immigrant farm workers, I was raised in the Central Valley of California. Now, I am blessed, honored and proud to be working in the Canal neighborhood of San Rafael.

It didn't take long after my recent arrival here as the new executive director of nonprofit Alcohol Justice to learn that many of the 15,000 residents of the Canal are well-acquainted and appreciative of the important work we do.

They know us because of our work with them and their children in our community. As one of three core projects of the Main Community Foundation, Alcohol Justice – originally called the Marin Institute for the Prevention of Alcohol and Other Drug Problems – has called the Canal neighborhood home since 1987.

A recent study by the [University of California, Berkeley's Othering and Belonging Institute](#) showed that the Canal is the most segregated neighborhood in the Bay Area. Several Bay Area media outlets

reported on the practices that led to it and the problems it causes. The racial and economic issues facing our organization's mostly brown neighbors are startling, but are no surprise as Alcohol Justice has been working hard for many years to address them

Our [Youth for Justice](#) program empowers young people to build a just and equitable future for our Latino community in San Rafael. It develops youth leaders who may go on to organize and implement environmental prevention policies to make neighborhoods healthier and safer.

Our "Minga" events are part of a Youth for Justice project called "A Clean Community for a Clean Mind." Minga is an Indigenous Kichwa word for a day of collective volunteer work. This project is creating a healthier community for all through the power of collective action to address the issues of alcohol- and drug-related litter and trash in the Canal. Meanwhile, [Proyecto Latino Tam](#) is our project to connect the Spanish-speaking Marin community with effective treatment for opioid use disorder.

Alcohol Justice also sponsors and gives a home in the Canal to the [San Rafael Alcohol and Drug Coalition](#), which unites youth and adult groups to discourage youth alcohol, marijuana, opioids, and prescription drug abuse. The coalition uses environmental prevention strategies to build youth leadership, support zones free of "alcopops" and promote safe and accountable stores. It works to reduce alcohol and marijuana use among underage youth, as well as to reduce opiate and prescription drug abuse throughout the Canal neighborhood and all of San Rafael.

I am truly grateful to be joining and leading these team efforts to create an environment that motivates, is proactive and has focused, committed professionals working hand in hand with the community. With few exceptions, a majority of our diverse staff are non-White and/or Spanish-speaking. They have firsthand knowledge and experience of the issues facing the people we serve and the mission we strive to achieve.

While the COVID-19 pandemic upset the supply chain for a number of our local programs, it sparked the creativity to pivot to digital delivery of services to our constituents. We are using WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and Zoom as we continue to provide a roadmap to a better life for children, youth, adults, seniors, families, and all those in need.

As a good neighbor, Alcohol Justice continues to address public policy development and substance misuse education while helping to meet health and social needs of the Canal community and beyond.

As Alcohol Justice's new executive director, it is my goal to lead by example. Improving the health, happiness and prosperity of the culture and community we live, work, and thrive in is what will make the Canal community a better place to call home.

While the challenges are great and the obstacles many, I can't think of a better time or place to call [Alcohol Justice](#) in the Canal my new home.

Cruz Avila is the new chief executive officer of Alcohol Justice, a San Rafael-based alcohol industry watchdog.