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COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS ACCELERATOR

MacEwan University concept captures first stage of Liquor Store Theft Challenge

A strategy to combat liquor store thefts entered by MacEwan University has been selected from more than 220 entries to go to a field trial of the first-ever challenge to be analyzed by the Edmonton Police Foundation's new Community Solutions Accelerator (CSA).

"It gives me great pride to announce that the most promising idea came from our own city, a team from the MacEwan University Social Innovation Institute," says Ashif Mawji, Chair of the Edmonton Police Foundation. "We're excited to test a home-grown concept, which was selected out of 222 other submissions from around the world, to try and help decrease liquor store theft while increasing community safety in our city and far beyond."

Through an analysis of the liquor store theft and robbery crisis in Alberta, the MacEwan bid identified that an effective intervention point to deter thefts is at the point of resale. This approach targets those restaurants, bars and nightclubs who purchase stolen liquor so they can resell to an unsuspecting public. The premise of the Edmonton proposal suggests if criminals lose the market for their stolen liquor then they will have less reason to steal liquor from stores.

The Social Innovation Institute proposed the development and implementation of a high-profile awareness campaign, the use of hidden tracking devices in bottles, and a whistle-blower cash prize targeted at restaurant employees who tip off police about their establishments buying stolen liquor. The purpose of all these measures is to cause those bars, restaurants, and nightclubs now purchasing stolen liquor to be fearful of being caught and prosecuted, which could have a significant negative effect on their business and the loss of their liquor license and/or criminal charges. The campaign will also focus on educating the public about the issue, giving them a sense of responsibility and inclusion in the solution.

"MacEwan University is honored to be awarded the opportunity to partner with ALCANNA and the Edmonton Police to address this critical issue in our city," says Dr. Wanda M. Costen, Dean & Professor, School of Business, MacEwan University.

"MacEwan's Social Innovation Institute, housed in the School of Business, is designed to provide opportunities for faculty, staff, and students to collaborate with business entities, non-profit organizations and government to address societal challenges. This engagement is a great example of how post-secondary institutions can positively impact the communities we serve."

In 2019, EPS officers responded to 9,565 theft of liquor calls across the city, or approximately 26 per day. Each call took an average of 1.5 hours of investigation time, constituting a significant draw on police resources, acknowledged EPS Chief Dale McFee.

“Liquor thefts in Edmonton and in cities across Canada continue to place immense pressures on police resources and their respective societies,” explained McFee. “We’re thrilled that a submission from an Edmonton university has been selected to help find a solution to easing the burdens caused by this crime on our communities.”

James Burns, Vice-Chair and CEO of ALCANNA - which contributed \$500,000 for the Challenge - added that “The MacEwan submission was the best at identifying the root cause of the theft and robbery escalation. The statistics are crystal clear and unarguable. When the COVID-19 pandemic shut down bars and restaurants, thefts and robberies were greatly reduced. When those restrictions on restaurants and bars were lifted, thefts and robberies rose dramatically. The MacEwan proposal is aimed at tracking down and prosecuting restaurant and bar owners who are customers of these criminals. It is they who are putting our employees and the public at risk just as much as the criminals are. Once they stop buying stolen liquor the criminals will have little reason to steal. We are looking forward to working with MacEwan in testing this solution as soon as possible.”

Although the concept will now undergo field trials, and the results must meet the criteria set out in the Challenge before it can be declared a winner, ALCANNA will initially award MacEwan a \$25,000 prize in recognition of their leading proposal.

MacEwan’s winning proposal was selected from 222 Liquor Store Theft Challenge submissions entered on the HeroX online, global platform. Submissions were received from Canada, Mexico, USA, Russia, Indonesia, Japan, Kenya, Nigeria, Tunisia, France, Morocco, Iran, Slovakia, Dubai, Brazil, among other countries. Submissions were categorized by University of Alberta MBA students (volunteered their time), as preventative, deterrence, disruption in behaviour and physiological. They also ranked the submissions in terms of idea strength.

A total of 12 applications were deemed as having a high chance of success, of which five were shortlisted by the independent judges. The five shortlisted submissions were invited to pitch via Zoom, which were evaluated by judges on various criteria, including likelihood of successful implementation, ability to navigate through challenges, etc.