

Staying sober in Denver: A Rhode Islander reports

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Since the hilarious Prohibition-era reports of The Baltimore Sun's H.L. Mencken and before, the American political convention has been a great place to drink. The free-flowing tradition holds this week in the Mile High City, where the Democratic National Convention kicked off Sunday with a New Orleans-themed bash at the downtown Denver Convention Center.

After the final gavel each night, the festivities adjourn to clubs and hotels around town, where individual state delegations and interest groups gather for music and socializing.

There's even a commemorative beer that's in demand -- Maverick breweries have slapped "Barack Obama" labels on their jumbo bottles.

All well and good for those who -- in the correct coinage of the liquor industry -- drink responsibly. But there are some who can't, former Rhode Island Rep. Tom Coderre of Pawtucket testifies from hard experience.

"I can remember being a delegate in the 1996 convention in Chicago and coming to those breakfasts and -- let's put it this way -- not feeling my best," said Coderre, whose battle with alcohol and cocaine were well-known in political circles.

So this year Coderre, who has been a recovering addict for some time now, helped to lead an effort to give sober conventioners a chance to gather over coffee and soft drinks and, if the spirit moves them, sit in on a 12-step meeting.

Coderre's friend Patrick Kennedy, the Rhode Island congressman whose experience with alcohol and drug addiction recovery has become a big part of his political life, was among the convention delegates who helped to publicize the availability of the "Wellness Recovery Rooms" in the Convention Center and the Pepsi Center, where the nightly Democratic program is staged.

The rooms also welcome those who suffer so-called "co-occurring" mental illness -- not at all uncommon in the world of addiction, Coderre said.

That's a tricky business, since anonymity is a hallmark of the [12-step alcohol and addiction recovery movement](#). But Coderre said the organizers of the rooms have depended on their informal networks to pass the word.

"It's a chronic condition. It's not something that goes away," Coderre said of addiction, "so we have to support each other."

Getting out of that world "has been such a turnaround, such a difference for me," Coderre said. And of course, he added with a smile, "I'm so much more alert to what's going on at the convention" than he was 12 years ago in Chicago.