

Acton-Boxborough Comes Together for Town Hall Meeting on Underage Drinking

On May 4, the Acton-Boxborough Community became one of hundreds of communities nationwide that held a Town Hall Meeting on Underage Drinking Prevention to alert the community to new research on the risks of underage drinking and empower the community to take action to stop it. The Federal government's Interagency Coordinating Committee for the Prevention of Underage Drinking (ICCPUD) is supporting Town Hall Meetings that are taking place in communities across America.

Coordinated by the Community Alliance for Youth (CAFY), the Town Hall Meeting educated parents, teachers, elected state leadership, police, churches, youth, and other community members about the impact underage drinking has on the community. Together, they discussed possible ways to address the issue.

Underage drinking is an important community concern. New data show that 29 percent of the nation's youth ages 12 to 20 have used alcohol illegally. Data from the 2004 Acton-Boxborough area Youth Risk Behavior Survey reveals that 27.6% of eighth graders reported having ever had a drink of alcohol other than for religious reasons. 9.4% of eighth graders reported having attended parties held in homes in their school district where alcohol use by teens is allowed in the 12 months prior to the survey. 43.1% of all High School respondents report having had at least one drink of alcohol on at least one occasion during the thirty days prior to the survey.

Research indicates that families exert a great deal of influence on whether a child uses alcohol later in life. "What parents may not realize," says Charles G. Curie, Chairman of ICCPUD and Administrator of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), "is that children say that their parents' disapproval of underage drinking is the key reason they have chosen not to drink."

SAMHSA reports that children and teens are less likely to abuse alcohol if parents are involved in their children's lives, make and enforce clear rules, and are positive role models.

On Thursday, May 4th, CAFY invited representatives from the entire Acton-Boxborough community, including parents, youth, education, substance abuse prevention, other health entities, justice/law enforcement, local government, and business.

Participants in the Town Meeting were shown a video which provided national statistics related to underage drinking. Following the video several participants shared their experiences related to underage drinking in our community.

Youth Officer Dan Silva reported that they are frequently called to big parties in private homes where there is underage drinking. He is aware of children as young as eighth grade engaging in public drinking. He believes most of the alcohol used by underage drinkers is obtained from their family liquor cabinet.

MA State Representative Jamie Eldridge shared his observations based on AB student interns in his office and his own experience growing up in Acton. He finds that youth in our community are under intense pressure to achieve. He noted that there are few youth activities and that ironically, the former local movie house is now retail liquor store. Representative Eldridge expressed his frustration that monies from the Health and Safety Grant supplied by the tobacco industry are no longer available and that it will be very difficult to obtain that level of funding again to support such services as a dedicated Drug and Alcohol counselor at the High school. (The current part-time Drug and Alcohol Counselor at ABRHS is not a HS employee but is funded by a grant from the local United Way.)

Sara Clinton, the part-time Substance Abuse counselor shared that while she had worked with 50 students referred to her, she believes that there are many highly functioning underage drinkers at school that don't perceive their drinking as a problem and therefore don't seek counseling.

MA State Representative Corey Atkins shared her experience during the 1980's in the Lowell area where they succeeded in reducing underage drinking by involving both parents and students in the solution. Parents committed to preventing parties with alcohol and instituting a policy of picking students up from parties with no questions asked (so that students could leave a party if underage drinking was done). Students came together to work on creating a message that drinking was not "cool", rather that staying sober was to be respected.

A private Substance Abuse counselor shared that her clinic's substance abuse department for both youth and adults was growing due to the large volume of alcohol addiction in our community.

An Acton Liquor Store owner reported that he hires a private police detail to monitor his store on Friday and Saturday evenings to deter patrons from purchasing alcohol for underage drinking. His employees follow strict procedures for checking IDs. He expressed concern re: the potential future legislation which could allow all grocery and convenience stores the right to sell alcohol as he believes this might make it easier for underage drinkers to obtain alcohol.

Students from the CAFY Student Advisory Committee shared that they felt early alcohol prevention and education was effective but could be increased. Also, one student felt that the perceptions of both students and adults regarding the actual amount of underage drinking might be exaggerated.

Bob Moore, minister of St. Matthew's shared that his youth groups are predominately pre-Junior High age and that seems to be an ideal time to educate to prevent underage drinking.

A parent participant noted that statistics support her perception that parent drinking behavior is an issue which strongly influences underage drinking.

Jon Kerr, Director of Danny's Place informed the participants that strict no alcohol policies at the youth center have been tested and upheld. Public drinking by 2 Junior High students was noted at one event and Acton Police were called. A parent participant shared that her daughter and friends found the incident upsetting rather than something to be admired and were concerned that the underage drinking of few would prevent the majority of non-drinking youth from enjoying school and Danny's Place sponsored events.

In anticipation of prom and senior celebrations, the Massachusetts Social Host Law was reviewed.

Several participants plan to meet again to discuss Next Steps which our community can implement to increase responsibility for individuals, parents, alcohol retailers, schools and the community at large to reduce underage drinking.

CAFY encourages community members to join them in working to reduce underage drinking. To learn more contact Robert McGowan at robert.mcgowan@mitretek.org. To learn more about underage drinking prevention log on to stopalcoholabuse.gov.