

Working to cap teen drinking

By Jennifer Fenn Lefferts, Globe Correspondent | July 22, 2007

When 16 teenagers were kicked out of a school dance this spring for drinking, it served as a wake-up call to many in the Acton-Boxborough community. Though efforts were already underway to help curb what many say is a growing problem in the two affluent suburban towns, plans have been kicked up a notch following the incident at Acton-Boxborough Regional High School.

"That led to a lot of parents being shocked and awed," said Acton police Detective Keith Campbell, the department's youth officer. "It was one of those unfortunate things where everybody was taken aback by the sheer amount of kids drinking."

Police, school officials, and community groups are working together over the next few months on several projects designed to prevent underage drinking, a surprisingly common activity among students that seems to get serious attention only in times of tragedy, like after a horrific traffic accident. Plans include a regional marketing campaign to educate teens about the dangers of drinking, implementing a Safe Homes program, in which parents don't allow teenagers to drink in their home or on their property, and strengthening town and school polices on underage drinking, said Tina Grosowsky, chairwoman of the Acton-Boxborough Community Alliance for Youth.

"The earlier kids start drinking, the likelier it is that they'll be a candidate for alcoholism," said Grosowsky. "You want to postpone risky behaviors as long as possible." Grosowsky said a recent Emerson Hospital Youth Behavior Risk Survey showed some alarming trends. For example, 62 percent of Acton-Boxborough seniors and nearly 19 percent of ninth-graders said that they had consumed alcohol in the month prior to the survey.

Campbell said the Acton Police Department is focusing its efforts on access to alcohol. He said officers are working with local businesses to prevent the sale of alcohol to minors and with parents to keep a better eye on what's going on at home. "What we're finding is a lot of the alcohol is coming from in-home liquor cabinets," he said. The department is working with the community alliance on the SafeHomes program, in which parents will sign a pledge saying they will not serve alcohol to youth, will not allow the consumption of alcohol by those under the legal drinking age in their homes or on their property, and will not allow parties in their homes when they are not present.

The SafeHomes program has made an impact in several communities in the area, including Westford, said Grosowsky, so the alliance decided to give it a try. The group recently received a \$6,000 grant from the Community Health Network Area, a coalition established by the state Department of Public Health, to help implement the program this fall. The alliance will also use the money to create a task force to review both town and school policies and practices regarding underage drinking.

Officials said punishment is one possible deterrent. If students caught drinking are stripped of their eligibility to participate in extracurricular activities, for example, that can have a significant impact on their decision to use alcohol, Campbell said. "The kids in Acton are driven toward the college atmosphere and don't want those blemishes," he said. "It's another tool for them to see the light." But Grosowsky hopes education will have an impact as well. The alliance plans to start an education campaign targeting underage drinking. This will include a townwide survey of parents to solicit feedback and to provide ideas related to the issue.

The group also plans to sponsor an open town meeting designed to raise community awareness related to the issue, two parent forums at which specialists will be on hand to discuss various strategies, and two education programs for teens.

To market those programs, the alliance will put out brochures, posters, fliers, and advertisements. Grosowsky said the campaign will touch other communities as well. The alliance has joined with networks in other communities to form a group called the Nashoba Merrimack Valley Coalition that would include Concord, Carlisle, Groton, Dunstable, Westford, and Chelmsford. That group recently received a \$1,500 grant to hire a consultant for the marketing campaign, which Grosowsky said will take place over the next year.

Representatives from other communities said it only makes sense to work on issues collaboratively because they are all dealing with the same problems. "We have a lot of similarities, so it can only help each of our communities and the region overall," said Joan Whitney, president of the Community Youth Alliance in Concord and Carlisle. Larry Khirallah, founder of the Chelmsford Coalition to Live Smart, said the marketing campaign is just one piece of the puzzle.

The coalition last fall launched the Sticker Shock campaign in which hundreds of colorful stickers were placed on bottles and cans in liquor stores to catch the eye of package store customers. The stickers say: "Providing alcohol to minors is illegal. Fines are up to \$2,000 and/or up to one year in jail!" Khirallah said the only way a community can make a difference is by working together with police, parents, teens, schools, and the business community.

"It's a social problem, and you can't affect social change unless you get buy-in," Khirallah said. In Concord and Carlisle, Whitney said, the focus has been on involving the teenagers in meaningful prevention programs. She said her coalition has started mentoring and leadership programs, which help the students to gain self confidence and stay away from alcohol and drugs. Jennifer Fenn Lefferts can be reached at jlefferts@yahoo.com.

What do you think?

Should your community do more to discourage underage drinking? Share your comments at boston.com/northwesttalk. Or e-mail us at globenorthwest@globe.com, with your name, hometown, and a daytime phone number (number for verification only).

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