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Mayor, chief warn parents: Help halt teen drinking

Mixing drinking, driving on the upswing

BY RAMONA CURTIS
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BELLEVILLE - Belleville Mayor Mark Eckert, Police Chief Dave Ruebhausen and Belleville high school leaders are banding together to send a strong message to the community: Give your teen alcohol or let them drink at home and you will go to jail.

Ruebhausen said that while the law prohibiting anyone under the age of 21 to drink alcohol has not changed, a new police department policy issued last month is more clearly-defined for police officers who encounter underage drinking.

"This gives the officers guidelines," he said. "It mandates if there are parents or adults who are contributing to underage drinking, supplying a place, or supplying alcohol, we are going to make an arrest if probable cause exists."

Eckert and Ruebhausen were at Belleville West High School on Tuesday and at Belleville East High School last week to make the community aware of the tightened policy. Ruebhausen said that they have also paid visits to Althoff Catholic High School and Governor French Academy.

"Twenty years ago, we believed 30 percent of our parents allowed kids to drink in their presence and probably 70 percent said it's not right," Eckert said at Tuesday's meeting in the Performing Arts Center at Belleville West.

"The fear is that those numbers have reversed. A lot of educators feel that 70 percent of parents don't know the rules, ignore the rules, drink with their teens or tell them it's OK to drink at home. But if you're at home drinking with anyone under the age of 21, it's contributing to the delinquency of a minor."

Eckert said the initiative came about following the alcohol-related death of Althoff Catholic High School baseball player Timothy Frazier in May. Frazier was 16 when he died after being thrown from a car driven by fellow student Daniel Polites. Another Althoff student, Bradley Fairbairn, was injured in the accident. Polites has been charged with aggravated driving under the influence and reckless homicide.

"(Althoff) Coach Glenn Schott came to me asking can we talk about a serious problem," Eckert said. "He was almost in tears talking about last spring with what happened with the high school student. ... He said, mayor, I need your help."

While there was only a handful of parents at Tuesday's meeting, they listened intently as both Eckert and Ruebhausen told them of the need to reinforce the dangers of drinking and driving to their teens and to closely monitor their activities.

"When they come home at night, check to see whether partying was going on," said Eckert, who told the parents he is also a parent of a teen. "You're not a squealer, you're saving lives."

Ruebhausen informed parents that they have to accept that their teenager may not always be truthful with them about their drinking.

"If you think your kids aren't drinking or aren't capable of getting in cars with people who were drinking, I hope you're right," he said. "But here's the cold, hard truth: a 2002 Department of Justice statistic says up to 75 percent of high school students drink. They go to parties and they drink or they get in cars with people who drink."

Parent Christy Halloran said that she was at the meeting because "I have a freshman this year and I need all the help I can get."

"It's hard because you think you raise your kids good and you hope they make the right decisions. But who knows?"

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