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Driving the Point Home

By Staff Shore News

Published on 10/2/2006

Waterford -

Only a handful of parents showed up at Waterford High School last week for a panel discussion on underage drinking, which is unfortunate, since the message was aimed at them.

"Parents Who Host Lose The Most" was the topic of discussion, focusing on a revised law that goes into effect Oct. 1 making parents responsible for any problems that result from underage drinking in their homes.

Under the old Social Host Law, which has been in effect in some states since 1987, if police were called to a residence due to out-of-control parties, they were not allowed to arrest anyone who was underage or the host because the drinking was being done on private property. Now, police will be able to make such arrests.

Waterford Police Youth Officer Steve Whitehead, one of the panelists in the discussion sponsored by the Waterford Anti-Drug Education program, said he believes that this new amendment is important and that parents need to be educated about how much underage drinking goes on.

"It's about knowledge," Whitehead said. "If you don't know what's going on you can't be there to stop it. We need for the parents to be educated about this. Parents also need to be aware of what is going on in their home at all times because kids will find that one house where they can drink and there is no one watching them."

Whitehead has first-hand experience in seeing the horrendous aftermath of underage drinking. It is what has committed him to the cause of getting this information out there. "I'm the guy who gets called out for all our fatal accidents," he said, adding that this is made even more difficult "when it's kids in high school or just out of high school that I have known and coached over the years; kids that I have watched grow up and now I have to identify them because they decided to get intoxicated and now they are dead. I am a parent, too, and this is the reason that I will continue getting this message out there."

Some parents may feel that the law does not affect them because they don't have teenagers at home, but Geralyn Laut is trying to change that mentality and help communities understand that underage drinking affects all of us. Laut is a consultant for the Connecticut Coalition to Stop Underage Drinking, and provides technical assistance and support to community coalitions. In her presentation, Laut showed a yearbook from Glastonbury High School and the "In memory" photographs of three students who were killed in a crash that also took the life of a father of three young children on his way home from work.

"These three seniors were drunk in that car and along with their own lives they took the life of an innocent father, leaving a widow with three children. In another case in Glastonbury where two party-goers were stabbed at a house party, the residents and neighbors didn't react, stating that the kids were from another town, they weren't our kids. In the work that I am doing I want neighbors to know they are all our kids and their choices and their actions affect all of us," she explained.

Laut went on to explicate that the party was held at a house where a 17-year-old girl was left home unsupervised for a weekend and even though neighbors saw that there was an out-of-control party going on right on their street, no one called the police to have it stopped. For Laut, the new amendment will help make parents understand that they need to know what their children are doing at all times. Until their children turn 21, parents have to be diligent because the statistics for tragedies, which include sexual assault as well as DWI, are daunting, she said. The loophole in the law is what prompted Laut and her group to take action.

"The mere exclusion of private property from the original statute made it possible for kids to be drinking at someone's house and previously the law allowed for minors to supply their own alcohol, leaving the parents or other adults who may or may not be in attendance, off the hook for technically not providing the alcohol to the minors," she explained. Laut added that the new law will address those loopholes, and parents, other adults and minors left unsupervised will be held responsible.

"I'm hoping that this new law will help us as a community to talk about this problem. There is no differential as to which kid is going to make good choices or bad choices and this issue affects all of us. I think

communities have to state that they will no longer tolerate underage drinking and the horrors that it can cause. By passing the law as a municipal ordinance, communities empower themselves," she said.

Mark Dubois, a professor of law at the University of Connecticut who has worked with alcohol and substance abuse, spoke about some of the research he did while dealing with an alcohol problem among graduate students.

"We had a huge problem with alcohol in the law school, so I along with a group of educators from various schools began researching to find the root causes. In studying the facts we realized that the problem doesn't begin when the students get to this level, it begins as early as middle and grammar school. As scary as this thought is, it is statistically proven that problems with alcohol start early." Dubois went on to explain that the teenage brain does not mix with alcohol due to its impulse control, or the lack thereof.

"The thinking is becoming that the appropriate societal response should be a form of prohibition because at certain ages, the brain should not be experimenting with the effects of alcohol," he added.

The criminal liabilities under the Social Host law are obvious but Dubois explained that the civil liabilities are increasing. He pointed out that the legal system is getting less tolerant of parents who provide alcohol to even their own children.

"I am seeing it now more and more. Parents are getting arrested and the judges are becoming less tolerant. The civil liabilities are also increasing for parents whose children drink on their private property, and then go out and cause damage to another person or someone else's property," he stated.

Donald Beebe, a trial lawyer, said that civil liability has far-reaching consequences that can ruin entire families.

"Fifty percent of my practice is personal injury and 50 percent is criminal liability and both of these are filled with alcohol-related facts," Beebe said. Though Beebe went on to make it clear that he doesn't feel parents can never have social events in their home or allow their kids to have friends over to socialize, he says that as a parent you have to be diligent with the rules.

"If they break the rules regarding alcohol there can be no appeals; there are no constitutional rights for the minor and as a parent you need to state this without blinking. It's that important because as a lawyer I have seen entire families financially wiped out in civil liability cases," he said.

More information about the issue is available from Sue Radway of the Waterford Youth Service Bureau at 444-5848, or from the Connecticut Coalition to Stop Underage Drinking Web site,

www.preventionworksct.org

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