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Response to “Parents held responsible for underage drinking” – *Associated Press 12/30/11*

Welcome to 2012 - let’s hope local parents and other adults step up to their responsibility for deterring and preventing underage drinking in their homes and on private property this year!

We don’t really know how things went so wrong for the parents from Menlo Park, CA, who faces 44 counts of suspicion of contributing to the delinquency of a minor from recent charges resulting from police response to a basement party thrown by their 17 year old son, as reported by Leanne Italie. The story didn’t report how the alcohol showed up, or if this was the first time police responded to a call at this location, or what precipitated the call that led police to find teenagers drinking alcohol at this home. Instead, the story attempted to examine whether holding parents legally responsible through the use of “social host” laws – laws designed to hold individuals responsible for hosting or allowing an event on private property where persons under 21 possess or consume alcohol – is an effective deterrent to underage drinking.

As social host laws are fairly new, there is limited research to establish their effectiveness. But because of the powerful message they send and the potential they have for reducing youth access to alcohol, such laws are recognized as best practices by leading prevention and research institutions. However, it has been noted that to be consistently effective, social host laws need to be publicized so that hosts understand their potential liabilities. This should include information designed to disabuse adults of the idea that underage drinking is not harmful as long as the youth are not allowed to drink and drive. Training programs from law enforcement agencies and their personnel should also be planned so that line officers are familiar with the procedures involved with issuing citations. Finally, additional research should be conducted to measure the impact social host laws have on underage drinking rates and the problems that result.

The few studies conducted to date on social host laws have reported the following effects; helping to establish a community norm that rejects underage drinking as an acceptable part of growing up, holding youth accountable for underage drinking parties planned without the knowledge of their parents, encouraging parents and other adults to take reasonable steps to prevent teenage drinking parties while they are away, increasing awareness and providing incentive for party hosts to be vigilant in preventing underage drinking, deterring adults and youth from hosting parties where underage drinking occurs, and allowing public safety personnel to issue a citation or charge individuals who host underage drinking parties for ‘providing the place for underage drinking to occur’.

The Alcohol Policy Information System, a project of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, reported as of January 2009; 33 states had adopted social host civil liability holding social hosts

accountable for furnishing alcohol illegally, 24 states had adopted social host criminal liability holding social hosts accountable for underage drinking parties, and hundreds of local communities in 21 states had passed social host or teen party ordinances that impose criminal or civil or administrative liability on social hosts for underage drinking parties. All southern states contiguous to Georgia have now adopted social host laws.

Private parties have repeatedly been identified as the primary source by which minors obtain alcohol and where binge drinking, other drug use and risky behaviors commonly occur. The public has long recognized that youth access to alcohol is problematic and current laws do not sufficiently address the problem of youth social access to alcohol, that's why such social host or teen party laws are being implemented.

Social host laws, when well written and judiciously applied, are designed to protect public health and safety. Not all such laws are well written. Those that address reasonable steps people can take for preventing the possession or consumption of alcohol by underage persons at a party and may also allow warnings for first time offenders and increasing penalties for repeat offenders. Parents may not be responsible if they did not know about the party. Parents and other adults may be responsible if they 'knew or reasonably should have known' about the party and/or if they 'failed to take reasonable steps' to prevent alcohol possession or consumption by underage persons.

The cost of underage drinking alone cost Georgia's citizens about \$1.7 billion annually. In addition to the many serious effects of underage drinking on youth and their families there are also serious second hand or public effects of underage drinking; car crashes, assaults, fraud, theft, vandalism, accidental injuries, sexually transmitted diseases, unintended pregnancies, and disruptions to school campus environments.

Parents and other adults are in the best position to deter and prevent underage drinking parties, but some fail to take reasonable steps to do so. Well publicized social host laws can be effective at encouraging more parents and adults to step up to their responsibility - enforcing underage drinking laws and keeping youth and the public safe is a collective responsibility.

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