

# Parental Responsibility and Underage Drinking: Is Social Host Law Enough?

By Manjula Batmanathan-Rigg

As a young mom, Vickie Ettelson listened to others talk about the day-to-day challenges of being a parent. She wanted to learn from their experiences so she could prepare herself better to raise her children and deal with conflicts as they arose. “That was the easy part,” says Ettelson, now a mother of three. “Wondering what I needed to do when my children woke up sick at night didn’t keep me up all night, but wondering how I can keep them from drinking and using drugs does.”

A vocal opponent of underage drinking and drugging, Ettelson and a group of Deerfield, Illinois, area moms have teamed up to form Deerfield Area PROUDD (Parents Rallying to Oppose Underage Drinking and Drugs). PROUDD reaches out to other area parents to discuss their kids, strategies to keep children alcohol-free and how to engage other parents. “It’s not as easy as you think it is,” says Ettelson, who also serves as the group’s chairman.

Her involvement came following a tragic incident in Deerfield which claimed two teens’ lives in the fall of 2006. Teens Ross Trace and Danny Bell, both 18, were killed in a car crash on their way home from an underage drinking party. The story made national headlines when an investigation revealed the underage drinking party was held in the presence of the host teen’s parents.

The deaths prompted a public outcry about parental responsibility. On August 31, 2007, a bill was signed into law in Illinois allowing police and prosecutors to charge parents with a felony if they knowingly allow underage drinking in their homes, subsequently leading to injuries or death.

“That was a wake-up call to all parents,” says Ettelson. “I had to look at what I needed to do as a parent to keep my children safe.” Educating herself about the dangers of underage drinking was Ettelson’s first step. “I needed to quit saying ‘my kids are good kids, it’s the others kids who are doing it’ and step into reality,” she explains. “It was a revelation to be able to say, this is about my kids and I need to be the one to be involved instead of blaming someone else for it.”

Many parents have come to see the importance of educating themselves and staying proactive in keeping their children away from alcohol and drugs, however the number is not high enough, says Ettelson. During a recent PROUDD-sponsored town hall meeting in Deerfield, Ettelson says only 30 parents came to show their support in fighting underage drinking.

“It was disappointing to see such a small turnout since more than 650 parents were personally invited to participate in the meeting,” Ettelson laments. “It sends a message to us that there is still a whole lot more that needs to be done in bringing this cause to parents’ attention.”

## Tragic Lesson

Since the social host law was passed, how much has the threat of jail time and a criminal record impacted parents, teens and underage drinking in the past year? The Deerfield tragedy led authorities to charge the parents of the teen host, Jeffrey and Sara Hutsell, who were both later found guilty of a misdemeanor. The new state social host law was not in place when the Hutsells were charged. They served a short time in jail, paid fines and were sentenced to probation and community service. But according to Liz Nelson, prevention specialist, Lake County Health Department and Community Health Center, the passage of the social host law “hasn’t had a dramatic impact.” Anecdotally she has heard that the parents who do take the risk are now more tight-lipped and discreet about hosting underage drinking parties in their homes.

Many parents are making healthy and safe choices, she says, but there is a vocal minority who still see this behavior as a rite of passage. “There is still a mentality that ‘I did it when I was young, so it’s not a big deal’ attitude toward underage drinking,” explains Nelson. Even after the tragic Deerfield incident, some parents remain apathetic about the potential harm underage drinking can have on their kids, she says.

“The social host law’s threat of a felony conviction has not been as large a deterrent as we had hoped for.” Civil liabilities, says Nelson, coupled with a felony conviction may have a larger impact.



## The Right Direction

Since the social-host law was signed, several Lake County coalitions were formed to work toward educating parents and creating awareness. Two active local coalitions, the Deerfield Area PRODD and the Stevenson Area PROUD, are working to change parent perception when it comes to underage drinking.

The groups have organized “parent coffees”, where parents meet to exchange ideas and skills on how to combat underage drinking. Nelson says such efforts are the first steps toward creating a network of parents who are committed to reducing underage drinking.

“The coalition hopes that through communication and awareness they can change the community norm and the role of underage drinking in youths’ lives,” explains Nelson. Two other coalitions in Lake County are also beginning to undertake similar actions—the Lake Forest and Lake Bluff Underage Drinking Prevention Coalition, and the Libertyville and Vernon Hills Area Community Partnership for Healthy Youth.

## Different Approaches

Nelson says that despite the tragedies, state laws, local ordinances and public outrage, there is a difference in how communities deal with underage drinking. “In the southern part of Lake County, a stronger coalition-building effort has been demonstrated,” she explains. “Local law enforcement from many communities across the county have become more diligent in conducting compliance checks and becoming involved with the Lake County Underage Drinking Prevention Task Force. Since the task force was formed

in late 2006, more information and data are being collected and shared by different agencies, and there is an effort to get everyone on the same page to combat underage drinking.”

“During the spring of 2007 we conducted four high school focus groups in different parts of the county to measure how teens are getting alcohol,” explains Nelson. While all participants reported teen parties, parents’ liquor cabinets and friends as the primary sources for obtaining alcohol, teens from less-affluent areas said local gas stations and independently owned liquor stores are also an easy access point for alcohol.

Nelson says the focus groups revealed that more community effort and enforcement are needed in areas where kids can get access to alcohol, while parental diligence and involvement plays a role in deterring kids from freely accessing alcohol available in their homes.

## Listen Up

“Parents, you need to lock it up,” says Nelson, as a call to parents to be more aware of their own alcohol supply in their homes. “You don’t need two bottles of rum, two bottles of vodka and a 24-pack of beer in your home at all times.” Nelson urges parents to only keep enough alcohol in their homes for occasional consumption and make it difficult for children to access the alcohol.

“Keep tabs on how much you have consumed and what is left,” she says. “Parents play the biggest role in ensuring their children’s safety.” It is the adult’s responsibility to make sure they maintain open and honest communication with their children, discuss the dangers of alcohol and substance abuse and get involved in their lives, stresses Nelson.

She also concedes that there is a fine line between being an involved parent as opposed to a parent who can’t trust their children. “Kids understand if you need to be a parent and ask questions about their whereabouts, their friends and what they are doing,” she says. “It is the parents’ job to do so.” And some teens, says Nelson, welcome parental questions.

“Most teens would rather have their parents ask questions than not care at all,” she explains. One high school student told Deerfield town hall meeting attendees that “she is sad and angry” over the senseless deaths of her fellow high school students as a result of drinking and called for more enforcement and awareness to help teens stay sober. “That was a powerful call from a teen,” says Nelson.

The Lake Forest/Lake Bluff Underage Drinking Prevention Coalition, in Lake County, has taken parent/teen communication to a new level with a media campaign to create awareness and encourage parents to become more active in their fight against underage drinking. A series of eight postcards are being sent out to all middle and high school parents in the area. Nelson says the move is to encourage parents and teens to stay alcohol-free and exercise judgment during prom week.

The Lake County Underage Drinking Prevention Task Force is also exploring a “Lock it up” type campaign in the coming months to urge parents to pay more attention to restricting access and keeping alcohol away from their kids.

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