

Hello, can we help you?

Sheriff's Department Tip Line Fights Underage Drinking

By Connie Laurie, M.A., CADP

Law enforcement officers see it all, and in Madison County, Illinois, the sheriff and his deputies have tired of seeing the consequences of underage drinking. To combat the problem, they've taken a suggestion from young people themselves.

At the fall 2003 Madison County Youth Forum, Sheriff Robert Hertz listened to young people request an anonymous tip line that could be used to report underage drinking parties and offenses. He immediately set up a system for citizens to provide such information.

Lt. Marc McLemore, Patrol Commander for the Madison County Sheriff's Department, said his team understands the importance of fighting underage drinking. Deputies see youth suffering the immediate negative outcomes of underage drinking in car crashes and other criminal behaviors that result from their bad choices after drinking. He added that the deputies know that in addition to these negative consequences, these young drinkers increase their chances of developing alcoholism.

Lt. McLemore believes that if we can prevent youth under 21 years old from drinking, his department can avoid encountering worse criminal problems with these young people later on. For instance, officers often see alcohol involved in domestic battery and other acts of violence.

The Madison County Sheriff's Department Tip Line uses a voice mail system to ensure anonymity. As soon as a message is finished recording, the Watch Commander on duty listens and takes the appropriate action. The line is monitored 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Should the information reported relate to another police department's area of jurisdiction, that



department is notified immediately. Deputies report that the line is a little extra work, but it is certainly no burden. Rather, it is a tremendous help to the sheriff's department.

Lt. McLemore says that the information deputies receive helps them do their job. He reports that area youth use the tip line often. They call to provide information about underage parties they've heard about and often advise about the source of alcohol as well. In many cases, the tip line is the department's only way of knowing about parties. A total of approximately 100 calls come in to the tip line every year.

While many law enforcement organizations have an anonymous tip line for crime, Lt. McLemore said that communities need to recognize the connection between crime and underage drinking. He encourages other departments to enhance their tip lines so that they can be used for underage drinking reports that require rapid response.

Tip lines can be excellent companion pieces for other efforts in communities. In Madison County, Chestnut Health Systems

is working with coalitions to provide communication campaigns against underage drinking. The messages of the *YOU ARE NOT ALONE* campaign remind adults, especially parents, that most adults do not think underage drinking is okay and believe that stopping underage drinking is their responsibility. One of the campaigns' calls to action will advertise the existence of the underage drinking tip line and encourage people to use it.

Through this phone line, Madison County law enforcement professionals have "eyes" all over the county. Those who would supply alcohol to minors are reminded that they are not safe just because there is no squad car in sight. Youth access to alcohol is reduced. The more people who know about this resource, the better it will work.

For more information about Madison County's underage drinking tip line, contact Lt. Marc Lemore at 618.692.7040 ext. 4917 or mbmclmore@co.madison.il.us.

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