

Hot on the TrAIL of Underage Drinking

New program punishes adults

By Veronica Vidal

Illinois adults have one more reason to think twice about providing liquor to teens. The state's new Tracking Alcohol in Illinois (TrAIL) program pinpoints those who sell or provide alcohol to a minor and punishes them accordingly. The program, funded by a \$100,000 traffic safety grant from the Illinois Department of Transportation, conducts special investigations when underage drinking is suspected in an incident that results in injury or death.

"The premise of the program is to hold adults accountable for providing the alcohol, and the overall goal of the program is to serve as a deterrent to underage drinking – keeping alcohol out of the hands of teens," said Ted Penesis, industry education manager for the Illinois Liquor Control Commission (ILCC).

The program launched last August in Sangamon and Jackson counties, and has since added five more counties in order to assess its effectiveness in different regions of the state. Kane, McHenry, Whiteside, Carroll and Jo Daviess counties are all currently piloting the program. Plans for statewide implementation are estimated at three years, with a possibility of expanding the scope to investigating any police response to underage drinking. Penesis emphasized the need to "work out the bugs" during the trial stages before that happens.

How it Works

When local officials arrive on the scene of a car crash, party, alcohol poisoning, sexual assault or other incident where underage drinking is suspected, they call a 24-hour hotline to have a TrAIL investigator dispatched to the site. Investigators can often trace the source of alcohol by interviewing witnesses, friends and family, and by collecting evidence such as receipts, fake IDs or video surveillance from local stores. Once the responsible party is identified, he or she is arrested and charged, and faces up to a one-year prison term and a \$2,500 fine.

"We are too busy dealing with the [immediate] situation that we don't have time to investigate every possible person a kid has come in contact with. That's the beauty of [TrAIL]; it's at your fingertips. It's one more tool law enforcement can utilize to keep alcohol out of the hands of minors," said Sangamon County Sheriff Neil Williamson. The Sangamon County Sheriff's Department also conducts stings to find out which establishments and retailers are selling alcohol to minors — results have shown a dramatic drop in noncompliance cases. The percentage of businesses selling alcohol to minors was 80 to 90 percent 10 years ago; today it's 20 percent or less. And, while the outcome of the stings has been positive, Williamson cautions: "Kids are getting resourceful and getting alcohol in other ways. There's a lot of peer pressure, but as long as we keep our presence visible and have programs like TrAIL, we'll make a lot of inroads."

So far, there have been seven cases reported to TrAIL investigators, three in suburban Chicago and the other four in downstate counties. In one case, an 18 year-old female who drank too much at a party was rushed to the hospital for alcohol poisoning. TrAIL investigators interviewed her friends and were able to identify the adults responsible for the party and charged them with providing alcohol to a minor. "The young woman's parents were thrilled to hear there was a program like this in place. It gave them peace of mind," Penesis said. The case is now in the court system and with that, Penesis adds, "The state's attorney's office is a critical component. The program isn't complete if the court system doesn't follow through on holding people accountable."



Currently, the state has approximately 50 TrAIL investigators from various state agencies including the Department of Conservation, the Illinois State Police, Secretary of State Police and special agents from the Liquor Control Commission. Ultimately, the ILCC will train local law enforcement to conduct TrAIL investigations. “We still want to be there to support them, but it’s important they conduct these investigations. It’s their town; they have much more information than we do,” Penesis said.

its outreach efforts on the road to help teach kids the consequences of underage drinking. The campaign travels to high schools and colleges so that students can experience a drunk driving simulator. Next year, the ILCC plans to address drinking and sexual assaults in its presentations. “We have to keep changing it up and presenting new ideas to these kids or else they’ll just tune it out,” Penesis said. The campaign also includes a Web site with information on penalties for using a fake ID and laws on underage drinking and possession. Educational materials are provided free of charge to schools and organizations.

Sheriff Williamson stressed the importance of educating adults about the program as well. “That’s the key because adults are the ones making it easy for minors. They have to know the consequences of supplying alcohol to minors. We all share the roadways together, and we have to be safe.”

In addition, a public service announcement campaign on underage drinking will kick off during this year’s prom season and will feature an Illinois mother who lost her son in an alcohol-related drowning incident.



Illinois is one of several states implementing this type of enforcement program. TrAIL is based on California’s TRACE (Targeting Responsibility for Alcohol Connected Emergencies) program, which was established in 2004 and awarded the Innovative Liquor Law Enforcement Program of the Year by the National Liquor Law Enforcement Association. Florida, Arizona and Hawaii also have similar programs that are based on TRACE.

The Educational Component

To complement the TrAIL program, the ILCC also created the “Don’t Be Sorry” educational campaign and has taken

For more information about TrAIL or the Don’t Be Sorry campaign, please contact Ted Penesis at 312.814.4802 or ted.penesis@illinois.gov.

You can also visit:
www.state.il.us/lcc/
www.dontbesorry.org

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