

# Leading Edge Efforts

## An overview of the 7th Annual National Leadership Conference

By Liz Nelson

In late August, hundreds of people from across the country came together for the Underage Drinking Enforcement Training Center's 7th Annual National Leadership Conference in Baltimore. The conference offered professional and youth tracks, both emphasizing environmental strategies to reduce underage drinking. Participants also heard words of encouragement and inspiration from J. Robert Flores, Administrator of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention; J. Joseph Curran Jr., Attorney General for the state of Maryland; Kerri Strug, OJJDP Special Assistant and Olympic Gold Medalist; and Jennifer Berry, Miss America 2006, to keep up the great work we are doing in the field to reduce underage drinking and its negative consequences.

With parental responsibility being a hot topic in Lake County and across Illinois, I attended several workshops and a general session on social host ordinances and laws. Social host laws refer to holding non-commercial individuals – including parents, land owners, and tenants – responsible for underage drinking events on property they own, lease, or otherwise control. With social host laws, the target is the person providing the location where the underage drinking takes place. (Source: *Center for the Study of Law and Enforcement Policy*) Across the United States, citizen activists are rolling up their sleeves, burning the midnight oil and getting creative in their challenges to underage drinking.



## Connecticut – House Parties

The Connecticut Coalition to Stop Underage Drinking has worked diligently over the last six years to pass local and statewide laws related to underage drinking parties. It worked at both the state and local levels due to uncertainty regarding how much time it would take to pass legislation at the state level. The coalition chose to work on a statewide “house party” law because Connecticut’s statute related to minors in possession did not include private property.

At the local level, many ordinances included a clause referring to a “social host,” prohibiting any person, youth or adult, from hosting a party where minors are permitted to consume alcohol, thus holding the parent or teen head of a household accountable if a party were to take place involving alcohol and persons under the age of 21 who were permitted to drink without the presence of their own parent or guardian. Nearly 50 municipalities in Connecticut have passed local ordinances related to house parties. A push began following a tragic course of events at an unsupervised house party involving alcohol in 1998, which resulted in the death of two teenage boys.

Success at the state level was due to coalition members being visible at their capitol almost every day the legislature was in session. They held late-night strategy teleconferences, so that they were not lobbying on work time, and made handbooks with pictures of every senator and representative, their names, what areas their district covered and how they were going to vote on the house party bill. When a legislator who was undecided or was planning on voting “no” would walk past a coalition member, they tried to engage them in conversation and get them to vote in favor of their bill. Their tireless efforts paid off because their bill passed and went into effect on October 1. For more information on the Connecticut Coalition to Stop Underage Drinking’s house party bill, visit its Web site at [www.housepartybill.org](http://www.housepartybill.org).



## Ventura County – Civil Social Host Ordinances

Ventura County, California, has been doing interesting work on environmental strategies to address underage drinking and more specifically related to social host ordinances from a civil perspective. At the time the Ventura County Behavioral Health Department began recruiting members for its county-wide Community Partnership to address underage drinking, San Diego's criminal social host ordinance was being challenged in appellate court. So the group decided to look into what it would entail to pass civil ordinance. Local data was gathered from the California Healthy Kids Survey. "Place of last drink" surveys were conducted by law enforcement in underage drinking-related incidents to strengthen the case for addressing underage drinking parties.

One of the positive aspects of a civil ordinance is the low burden of proof that law enforcement needs to enter private property and write a civil citation. City attorneys, however, were hesitant to work on this unfamiliar issue. The support of local coalitions and law enforcement was extremely helpful in getting civil social host ordinances passed. Sergeant Gary Pentis from the Ventura County Sheriff's Department stated that framing the issue from a public safety standpoint – citing how many sexual assaults result from house parties, the multiple times officers are called to the same homes and showing pictures from local youth's online "MySpace" accounts – helped San Diego City Council members realize the critical need for a social host ordinance.

The process for getting social host ordinances passed in Ventura County took about two years. Educating the community and stakeholders helped to get support from the bottom up and the top down. The Community Partnership spent time educating school superintendents and getting sergeants from the local police departments on board. The local coalitions hosted town hall meetings and had discussions about the social host ordinances as part of those events.

Components of the civil social host ordinances passed in Ventura County include high fines and a cost recovery option for city attorney fees, emergency personnel costs and other expenses. The starting fine for most of the municipalities is \$1,000, with one town beginning at \$500 and another at \$1,500. By the end of August 2006, 10 out of the 13 municipalities in Ventura County had passed civil ordinances. Community Partnership members expect the remaining municipalities will pass their ordinances in the next several months. For more information on Ventura County's Community Partnership for Responsible Alcohol Polices and Practices visit its Web site at [www.venturacountylimits.org](http://www.venturacountylimits.org).

## Youth Movement

"Take it Back" is a national movement led by youth to reduce alcohol problems and increase the health and safety of youth. *Take it Back* is about reclaiming what has been taken from youth due to alcohol, including their safety, dignity, culture, good health and future. (Source: [www.utakeitback.org](http://www.utakeitback.org))

*Take it Back* was the foundation for the youth track of the conference and the kick-off for the movement. It is not a program or curriculum, but rather a foundation of tools and guiding principals for youth to use regarding underage drinking prevention. Youth groups from across the country that are working on underage drinking prevention were given an opportunity to talk about some of the steps they have taken and the success they are achieving. All of the students who spoke have been implementing environmental strategies and are using available data to guide their efforts.

The San Diego Youth Council was a group highlighted for work it has been doing around removing clothing with alcohol messages from retail outlets such as Abercrombie & Fitch. The group received positive coverage from several television stations. One of the stations even did a follow-up with several of the retailers three months later to see if they had put the clothing back on the shelf; one store had. The San Diego Youth Council is one branch of a larger coalition – the San Diego County Policy Panel on Youth Access to Alcohol – that is working on other initiatives such as alcohol-free beaches.

Youth who were involved in the track also heard about other strategies, such as media advocacy, and participated in a silent protest during a general session. Young people paraded silently through the ballroom with signs stating their disgust with the alcohol industry and its marketing practices, as well as asking for volunteers to join their cause.

The Underage Drinking Enforcement Training Center, Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America, FACE Resources, and the Marin Institute are among the several organizations helping provide resources and support for *Take it Back*. The *Take it Back* Web site, [www.utakeitback.org](http://www.utakeitback.org), has multiple resources regarding conducting community assessments, highlights from community coalitions that have had success regarding alcohol policies, sample letters to the editor and other helpful tools.

For more information about the Underage Drinking Enforcement Training Center's National Leadership Conferences visit [www.udetc.org](http://www.udetc.org).

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