

One Night, One Message:

Stop Underage Drinking

By Veronica Vidal

The message delivered on March 28 was clear: Alcohol is the most widely used drug among youth today, and we need to curb the problem. Societal messages and liquor advertisements have created an environment that glorifies alcohol, leaving an impressionable youth vulnerable to the pressures of drinking. March 28 was a response to those pressures. That night, drug prevention coalitions across Illinois held town hall meetings, joining a national, concerted effort to raise public awareness and find solutions to the dangerous and persistent problem of underage drinking.

The meetings were an initiative sponsored by the Illinois Department of Human Services' Division of Community Health and Prevention, the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and the Interagency Coordinating Committee on the Prevention of Underage Drinking. The sessions provided information to educators, parents, businesses and community leaders on prevention and drinking-related issues such as health effects, traffic crashes, violence, high-risk sex and more.

Town Hall Meeting Turnout

Youth under the age of 21	797 or 25%
Law Enforcement	218 or 7%
Elected Officials	118 or 4%
Faith Based Organizations	91 or 3%
Parents/Citizens of the Community	1,146 or 36%
Education	222 or 7%
Human/Social Service Agencies	321 or 10%
Business	80 or 3%
Alcohol Retailers/Outlets	24 or 1%
Public Health Departments	72 or 2%
Media	28 or 1%
Total number of people in attendance	3,151

In 2005, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reported that traffic crashes were the number one killer of teens. According to the Illinois Department of Transportation, of all drivers involved in fatal crashes and found to be legally intoxicated, 19 percent are under age 21. And, according to a 2001 study by the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, the problems and costs associated with underage drinking total a whopping \$2.6 billion annually at the expense of the citizens of Illinois.

Bringing the topic home, the more than 60 prevention coalitions coordinating the town hall meetings in Illinois provided local statistics on youth and drinking – challenging citizens to take action. Jeanne Brady of Citizens Against Substance Abuse of Woodford County described the reaction to a local survey: “I think the actual statistics surprised them. People paid attention to this information, and it spurred some to action, as we received nine new volunteers [who will help plan follow-up meetings, speak to groups on the subject and recruit people to attend meetings].”

In Chicago, the Bobby E. Wright Comprehensive Behavioral Health Center and the Illinois Coalition to Stop Underage Drinking addressed how aggressive marketing tactics exploit hip-hop culture to reach the African-American community, especially young people. Attorney General Lisa Madigan opened the Chicago meeting with encouraging words, followed by Syron Smith of the New Black Leadership Coalition, who presented astonishing statistics on lottery and liquor vendors in Chicago. A look at the city's predominately African-American neighborhoods showed there are more than 609 vendors, with 169 primarily selling liquor. “We need to control the licensing to stop these stores from setting up shop,” Smith emphasized.

“Our children are not our future, they are our present,” said Ronald “Kwesi” Harris of BEW, explaining the urgency of addressing youth issues today in order to ensure their future. Harris presented a series of photos of billboards that combined images of “cool” with that of a liquor product. He plans to rally the same leaders who helped stop Kool cigarettes' Kool Mix campaign – a campaign that used hip-hop themes to attract youth – to organize a movement against alcohol advertisements. Harris cited simple tasks – such as environmental scanning (recording the number of alcohol billboards in your neighborhood) and building a community legislative agenda – that will help gain the attention of legislators.

Underage drinking is a persistent public health problem. Continuing a conversation that leads to the development of strategies is key to effective action. For Illinois, these meetings demonstrated that prevention efforts should focus on making communities aware of the problem, educating youth on positive alternatives and advocating for curricula, policies and activities that promote the non-use of alcohol.

For more information, visit www.stopalcoholabuse.gov.

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