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Underage Drinking Discussed

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CROMWELL -- More than 300 people intent on saving lives spent Wednesday arming themselves with information and strategies to combat Connecticut's underage drinking epidemic.

Those who attended the Connecticut Coalition to Stop Underage Drinking's 10th annual conference went home knowing they face a daunting challenge.

According to a survey of minors attending Connecticut high schools, 45 percent of students admit to drinking alcohol recently; 28 percent admit to recent binge drinking; and 74 percent admit to drinking sometime during their young lives.

In the survey, 21.3 percent of high schoolers said they consumed their first alcoholic drink before the age of 13.

Annually, underage drinking is responsible for 12 deaths for every 100,000 Connecticut residents aged 16 to 20, stated Matthew J. Cook, a research analyst and clinical instructor at the University of Connecticut School of Medicine.

"Connecticut definitely likes to drink," Cook told a workshop Wednesday. "Alcohol is a problem in all of our communities. ... We still have a lot of work to do."

As part of a strategy to combat underage drinking, legislation that took effect Oct. 1 eliminated some legal loopholes that kept police from dealing with the problem of kids drinking on private property.

It is now illegal for minors to possess alcohol on both public and private property. The penalty for the first offense is a \$146 fine. Subsequent offenses can result in fines ranging from \$200 to \$500.

In the past, law enforcement officials were prohibited from venturing onto private property.

The new underage drinking law also punishes irresponsible adults.

It's now illegal for an adult to knowingly host a party where alcohol is consumed by individuals under 21, regardless of whether the adult provided or served the alcohol. Fines range from \$146 to \$500, with the potential for up to a year in jail for a second or third offense.

State Trooper Christopher Bartolotta, the first officer in Connecticut to be certified as a drug recognition expert, conducted a seminar on how to spot fake IDs.

Students attending Wednesday's daylong conference at the Crowne Plaza said they learned strategies that will be effective in their communities.

Jillian Ryder, a 15-year-old from Durham, said teens can assist police by participating in stings at businesses that are selling alcohol to minors.

"Kids can make a difference. It's a community thing," said Kerri Furbush, 17, of Stratford. "When adults see us talking about ways of protecting ourselves, it's important."

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