

## RYASAP, Municipalities Tackle Underage Drinking

By Erin Lynch, Fairfield Citizen-News

Article Launched: 11/17/2006 04:16:07 PM EST

With a new state law on the books and a commitment from area municipalities, several agencies are ready to put the cork on underage drinking.

The Regional Youth/Adult Substance Abuse Project conducted a press conference yesterday focusing on the new underage drinking law, the regions focusing on combating the problem and briefly touching on the newly released 2006 report "Incidence & Prevalence of Underage Drinking in the Greater Bridgeport Region."

RYASAP is an urban/suburban youth and community development coalition that serves the Greater Bridgeport region, which comprises Bridgeport, Easton, Redding, Fairfield, Monroe, Stratford and Trumbull. RYASAP also offers local and statewide programs in juvenile justice advocacy, young adult leadership and asset-based youth community development training and consultation.

During the press conference at RYASAP's offices in the Black Rock section of Bridgeport, Robert M. Francis, RYASAP executive director, told those in attendance that alcohol use among young people "is a big issue across our region and it's an issue that has existed as long as RYASAP has existed and it's the one substance abuse issue that hasn't gone away."

Francis then gave an overview of the report, which he said was conducted in 2004 to 2005 and surveyed 3,310 youth in grades seven to 12 in the Bridgeport, Fairfield, Monroe, Stratford and Trumbull school districts.

Of those surveyed at the time, 32 percent admitted to using alcohol at least once in the last 30 days, 18 percent admitted to getting drunk once or more in the last two weeks, 8 percent admitted to driving after drinking and 33 percent admitted to riding in a car three or more times in the past year with someone who had been drinking.

According to the report, Fairfield has the highest rate of alcohol use out of all the districts surveyed. The results showed that 41 percent of the students admitted to drinking alcohol, while Bridgeport showed 26 percent, Monroe showed 28 percent, Stratford showed 29 percent and Trumbull showed 39 percent. Fairfield also showed the highest gambling rate among the students studied with 38 percent.

Francis said one of the interesting factors that the study showed was that "there is no difference whatsoever between young males and young females in this data."

The study also showed that while 64 percent of students said they have never participated in binge drinking, 36 percent

said they had. That number is troublesome, according to Francis, because "the next riskiest year is their freshman year in college."

Next to speak during the press conference was Jane Laster, RYASAP prevention partnership director, who briefly gave an overview of the new underage drinking law. As of Oct. 1, a new bill hit the books that toughened up the state's stance on underage drinking. The law now makes it illegal for minors to possess alcohol anywhere whether it's on public or private property. The law also states that adults cannot allow underage drinking to occur on their own property.

Before this law was passed, it was illegal for minors to possess alcohol on any street, highway or public place but private property was excluded.

Laster said before this law was enacted 39 towns and cities across the state already had underage drinking ordinances, but now that there is a state law "it now sends a consistent message that it's not OK wherever you are in the state of Connecticut."

The next segment of the press conference focused on the communities' viewpoint of underage drinking. Speaking during this portion was Trumbull First Selectman Raymond Baldwin; Redding Chief of Police Douglas Fuchs; Stephanie Swist, student assistance counselor at Fairfield Warde High School; and Stephen Kinsella of Hall-Brooke Behavioral Health Services.

Baldwin said he was very pleased with the new state law because it is a uniform bill for all municipalities to follow. He said it is "good" for police departments, prosecutors and judges because "everyone is now on the same page."

Even though legal agencies are all on the same page on underage drinking, Baldwin said it is also important for parents to take part. "The education process on this is not just about educating kids but also an educating process for parents as well." Baldwin said alcohol consumption is a behavior that is learned at home and "also seems to be the most socially acceptable [intoxicant] with adults."

"The responsibility has to begin at home, and it is important for parental involvement," he said.

Fuchs said, "Kids drink for one purpose, they don't drink to drink socially, they drink to get drunk." That mentality is the reason for sexual assaults, injuries, violence, vandalism, car accidents and driving-under-the-influence arrests among teens, he said.

Fairfield County "has the earliest onset of alcohol use in the country," and "alcohol continues to be the number one drug of choice of our youth in Connecticut," he said. Because of that, Fuchs cautioned parents, "Please, don't ever say that phrase, 'It's not my kid.'"

One tip Fuchs had for parents was for them to make a commitment to their children that they will pick them up, wherever they are, at whatever time, "with no questions

asked and no surprises" if their child is in a situation where alcohol is present.

Swist, who said she also conducts evaluations for various courthouses of first- and second-time DUI offenders, said the majority of the offenders she meets with admitted to first experimenting with alcohol at the ages of 11 through 16.

Even if some teens do not drink alcohol, Swist said, they are affected by it severely because "every time they are out sociably" they are faced with something that could affect their life such as friends driving drunk and "having to baby-sit" friends who had too much to drink. "This is truly an issue with all our teens because their lives are impacted on a daily basis," she said.

"Teens lack the foresight, which comes with emotional security and wisdom; it's up to us to offer that foresight," she said.

Kinsella spoke next and said, "Very frequently by the time we see a young person, the progress of their alcohol consumption is very prevalent." The young people Hall-Brooke treats for alcohol dependence, he said, usually have another addict living in the home. He said 70 to 80 percent of the young adults he treats say there is alcohol addiction at home; because of that number he said it was "very important" for parents to talk to their kids about drinking.

Also speaking at the press conference was Jeanne DiMuzio, director of wellness and prevention at Fairfield University. Agreeing with Kinsella, DiMuzio said educating children on the dangers of alcohol use needs to start "in the schools, churches and neighborhoods."

"The first conversation you have with your children about alcohol is one that can never stop," she said.

"We have to start talking, keep talking and never stop talking," she said.