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Guilty Party

A Newly Enacted State Amendment Aims At High School Drinkers. But Does It Hit College Drinkers, Too?

By Adam Bulger

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The amendment doesn't change anything crucial for underage drinkers. The changes to Connecticut House Bill 5211 that took effect on Oct. 1 make it easier for police to bust underage kids. The amendment just closes a perceived oversight in the state's law.

"Connecticut had this quirk in our law that was interpreted by the police and prosecutors as a loophole that said underage people can't possess alcohol in public," state representative Mike Lawlor (D-East Haven), one of the amendment's sponsors, said. "That was interpreted to mean that didn't include private property, like someone's home or backyard."

The new law makes the owners of property where underage drinking occurs accountable. First-time offenders receive a \$150 fine, and subsequent offenders risk larger fines and possible jail-time. The Connecticut Coalition to Stop Underage Drinking has been fighting for such a measure for five years. After the well-publicized January arrest of Farmington couple Dawn and Paul Bracone for holding a keg party for their son's 18th birthday, the cause gathered momentum.

"That helped our cause because it happened two weeks before a public hearing about our case," CCSUD community coordinator Geralyn Laut said.

The law is aimed at offenders like the Bracones, parents who willfully served alcohol to high school students. Still, some local college officials are concerned about how the ruling affects campuses.

“The difference is who can be held accountable. A number of the fraternities at Trinity are on the general confines of the campus, but are private organizations with alumni officers and current officers,” Trinity College dean of Students Frederick Alford said. “[They] would be held accountable under this law.”

Trinity has recently undertaken several measures to fight its reputation as a party school.

However, the school still has an active fraternity scene. The frats are privately owned, and their alumni owners and student officers are now accountable for the underage drinking that happens at the houses.

Alford said fraternities have been informed about the law’s ramifications and what it means for them as property owners.

“We have been going over the law with them, talking about responsible approaches to hosting social events. We want to help them in an educational capacity to understand what their responsibility is before the law,” Alford said.

The law doesn’t give police more leeway to enter a property they suspect of hosting underage drinking. And luckily for Trinity students, busting college parties is a low priority for Hartford police, or so I’ve gathered from how HPD spokesperson Nancy Mulroy didn’t return the three voicemails I left asking about the subject of priority.

Representative Lawlor, a University of New Haven criminology professor, said the legislation will have little effect on colleges, and the effect it may have will be tempered by trial and error, and hopefully common sense.

“At some point, you do have to rely on the police to use their common sense and discretion. You can pretty much take any law and think up extreme examples of how they can overdo it. If that happens, we’ll deal with it,” Lawlor said. ●

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