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Parents told to alter ideas on drinking

Luther Turmelle , North Bureau Chief

-WALLINGFORD — Parents of teenagers need to do a reality check when it comes to their attitudes on underage drinking, a panel of experts from Wallingford and Cheshire said at a community forum Wednesday night.

"People need to see alcohol as a poison for their kids," Craig Turner, Wallingford's director of youth and social services, said at the event sponsored by the Cheshire/Wallingford League of Women Voters at Ashlar Village.

"The key contributor to access to alcohol for teenagers is in the hands of the parents. It isn't cool anymore ... for parents to think they can control this by overseeing it," he said.

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The forum, which was attended by about two dozen people, comes just days before a new law closes the loop hole in current state law regarding possession of alcohol on private property and so-called "social hosts" — parents who play host to teenage drinking parties. The law is scheduled to take effect Sunday.

Dealing with underage drinking issues means parents must confront their own feelings — and past practices — as they relate to alcohol use, panelists of the forum said.

"It's something that's hard for parents to get their arms around," said Carolyn Davis, a social worker at Cheshire's Dodd Middle School. "That makes it hard for us to get parents as a captive audience."

Turner argued that while school officials are willing to help the communities address the problem of underage drinking, they are being forced to shoulder more of the burden than they should have to.

"That's not good public policy," he said.

Cheshire Police Officer Bill Fountain said underage drinking leads to sexual assaults, property damage and fights. He said that since July, the department has made 50 arrests for underage drinking.

"It's risky behavior ... and it happens all the time," said Fountain, the department's youth officer. "It happens every day and we don't always catch it."

Fountain said the new "social host" law will be another tool law enforcement officials will use to address the problem.

Turner stressed the importance of parental involvement, knowing where your children are, who they're with and spending as much time with them as possible.

"Developing a connection is the key," he said. "Teens are less likely to drink if they know parents are going to be around."

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