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# Redding Pilot Underage drinking target of state law

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Parents, party hosts, and partiers, beware. The second time an adult is caught hosting a drinking party for minors, and the second time a minor is caught with alcohol, a court appearance will be required.

Hosting a drinking party for minors is now a violation of the state's general statutes, according to a new law which took effect on Oct. 1. A second offense garners a \$1,500 fine or up to 18 months in jail.

For the kids under 21 years of age, a second charge of alcohol possession means they will have to take time off from school to spend a day in court. Instead of the \$99 infraction fine under Redding's law, after a second offense teens will have to pony up \$200 to \$500 in fines under the new state law.

The party host's fine can be imposed broadly, on any who can be shown to be "in control" of a premises or property, whether they are an owner, renter, subletter, parent, guardian or relative or a friend of the family. The law additionally mandates that if they know a teenager is drinking or in possession of alcohol on property under their control, they must "make reasonable efforts to halt such possession."

The fines for minors with alcohol not only apply to violations in private homes and lands, but also to violations on publicly-owned property not normally considered a "public place," such as town- or state-owned land where a bonfire drinking party might be tucked away in the woods.

Police Chief Douglas Fuchs called it the "House Party" statute, and said the law changes were geared specifically to prevent underage drinking parties. "It pretty much supersedes the Redding town ordinance, though that will remain on the books," Chief Fuchs said this week. "This state law allows it to be a misdemeanor as well as an infraction," Chief Fuchs said, adding that, while infractions are payable by mail, a misdemeanor requires court.

In 2004, Redding passed its own "House Party" ordinance to combat underage drinking on private property. The law was proposed by five students from Joel Barlow High School who worked with Chief Fuchs to come up with the ordinance.

"When we passed the underage drinking ordinance, (in Redding) the support was overwhelming from the community," Chief Fuchs said.

"If nothing else, awareness about the issue was raised and the passing of this statute raises that awareness again, which is very necessary because kids don't drink socially, they drink to get drunk," he said. This can lead to alcohol poisoning and other behaviors such as vandalism, assault and even sexual assault, the chief added.

When Redding's law went into effect on April 16, 2004, the town joined some 32 others in Connecticut that had already passed a similar ordinance. Just as the new state law does, it gave police a method for immediate action when they encounter a party-in-progress. Instead of waiting 12 hours for an arrest warrant, the police are able to write a ticket to the underage drinker(s) or the party's host on the spot.

The state law "is very similar, but what it does is, it levels the playing field among all municipalities," Chief Fuchs said.

On Oct. 18, Chief Fuchs was guest presenter at a workshop given by the Connecticut Coalition to Stop Underage Drinking, which had pushed for changes in the law.

“This past week, they (the Coalition) had their annual summit, attended by a variety of persons, some students, different types of substance abuse counselors and by law enforcement.

“I conducted a class in conjunction with the DUI prosecutor from the chief state’s attorney’s office, the per se coordinator from the department of motor vehicles, and the director of liquor control division of consumer protection, (also a state agency).

“It was all about training for the difference disciplines that were there... We spoke about DUI enforcement, underage drinking, how to prepare a case properly for court and for MV hearings, and the impact of the new House Party Statute on communities,” he said.

“While preventing youth or anyone from getting behind the wheel after drinking is paramount, it is equally as important to understand the inherent dangers of drinking to get drunk in the first place,” he said. “We have transported far too many kids to the emergency room with alcohol poisoning and when kids are drinking, there are always a number of associated illegal activities that seem to go along with it.”

The state law “makes it easier from an enforcement standpoint because every municipality is enforcing the same law and, obviously, more training will be available since it is a state statute,” Chief Fuchs said.

More information on the bill, including its entire text, may be found at <http://www.housepartybill.org>.

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