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# Stronger underage drinking rules to become law

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Starting next week, parents and other adults who allow underage drinking on their property could face stiff fines or up to a year behind bars.

A new state law that goes into effect Oct. 1 aims to stop the drinking bashes across the state that have led to the deaths of teens, including 19-year-old Stamford resident Jason Lorenti in 2004 and 18-year-old Greenwich resident Monique Da Lan in 1999. Both died in car accidents leaving parties where alcohol was served to minors.

Anyone who knowingly allows a minor to consume alcohol on his or her property -- or does not make "reasonable efforts" to stop them from drinking -- will be in violation of the law. The first offense is an infraction that carries a \$146 fine. Adults could be fined up to \$500 or imprisoned for up to a year, or both, for subsequent offenses.

Minors found in possession of alcohol get an infraction for the first offense; subsequent violations lead to fines of \$200 to \$500.

Exceptions to the law include parents who allow their children, or spouses who allow their underage husbands and wives, to consume alcohol under their supervision. There is also an exception for minors who consume alcohol as part of religious observances.

"We made sure that it doesn't prohibit people from serving alcohol to their own children," said state Rep. Donald Sherer, R-Stamford, one of the bill's co-sponsors. "But on the other hand, if someone opens up the doors to other people's children, and serves beer or hard alcohol, then they have to pay the consequences if police enter the property."

Police need probable cause to enter property.

Previously, it was only against the law for minors to possess alcohol in public places.

Sherer proposed similar legislation in 2003, after constituents complained there were no penalties for parents who serve alcohol to their children's friends but didn't have enough support in the legislature at the time.

During the last session, legislators were swayed by the testimony of high school students who lobbied for the house party legislation and parents of drunken-driving victims, including David Pease of Wilton, whose son, Casey, was killed in a one-car accident on Stamford's Long Ridge Road after celebrating his 24th birthday at New York City bars with friends in 2001.

Pease said he hopes the new law will send a message to parents not to condone underage drinking.

"Many parents tend to look the other way, thinking it's a rite of passage . . . not realizing the message is, 'Hey, drinking is important. Let me show you how to do it,' " Pease said. "Parents just need to recognize the subtle messages underneath their actions."

Looking back, Pease said he was more concerned about his sons using marijuana as youths than alcohol, never thinking about the impact it could have on their brain development or that it could lead to binge drinking.

The changes to the underage drinking statutes are among about 100 new laws that go into effect next week.

Another new law will hit close to home for Stamford residents who remember the city's long battle to demolish a blighted house at 179 Highview Ave.

The law, written by state Sen. Andrew McDonald, D-Stamford, allows municipalities that pass a local ordinance to place liens on properties with unpaid housing and health code fines.

It also allows the municipalities to charge the property owners, through their taxes, for any expenses incurred to make the property safe, including demolition or repairs.

Before the new law, municipalities had to obtain a court order to get a property owner to pay unpaid housing, health and building code fines.

McDonald said the Highview Avenue case was the impetus for legislation because the city did not get any payment from fines levied and demolished the building at taxpayers' expense.

"This bill is going to be a powerful tool in helping urban governments make housing more safe and sanitary and attack the underlying problem of absentee landlords who allow their property to fall into disrepair," McDonald said. "That's important not only for the people who live in these homes, but also the neighbors of those properties."

The law applies to homes with serious health and safety violations that do not qualify as blighted, he said.

A provision in the law raises the maximum municipalities can fine violators of all local ordinances from \$100 to \$250.

## Some of the other new state laws:

- \* Allow 16- and 17-year-olds involved with safe ride programs to drive teens who have been drinking from midnight to 5 a.m. The safe ride program must be sponsored by the American Red Cross, the Boys Scouts of America or another national service organization.
- \* Make intoxicated operators of snowmobile and all-terrain vehicles subject to the same penalties as those who operate motor vehicles while under the influence of alcohol or drugs, including suspension of their driver's licenses.
- \* Outlaw selling, purchasing or owning machines that allow the user to get high by inhaling an alcohol-infused mist. Violators may be fined up to \$1,000 or be sent to prison for up to six months.
- \* Require health insurance carriers to cover neuropsychological testing for children with cancer to assess the extent chemotherapy or radiation treatment has caused cognitive or developmental delays.
- \* Require health insurance carriers to cover ultrasounds for women at increased risk of getting breast cancer because of family history or their personal history.
- \* Allows licensed physical therapists to treat patients directly, without a referral from another health care practitioner.
- \* Require the state Department of Children and Families to notify the grandparents when a child is taken from a parent. The state must use their best efforts to contact the grandparents within 15 days of removing the child.
- \* Allows certain pets, with approval from a veterinarian and the state, to be exempt from rabies vaccinations.
- \* Call for public input on a new name for the state Department of Mental Retardation.
- \* Allow drivers to keep any deer, moose or black bears they kill or seriously injure in an accident after the animal has been inspected by local police, state police or conservation officer and a wildlife kill report has been issued. If the driver does not want the animal, anyone may take it.

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