

NEWSLETTER August 2011

What Have We Learned About Underage Drinking?

A personal reflection by Pamela S. Erickson

In December 2010, underage drinking reached an historic lowpoint, according to the Monitoring the Future (MTF) survey. For someone who has worked on this issue since 1996, this was welcome news. But, it was hard-earned. I remember many years when drinking rates went up despite all our efforts. So, I for one, do not want to see any back-sliding. Instead this a good time to review what we have learned and refocus our efforts. While we have made progress, too many kids are still drinking; and, drinking in dangerous ways. Alcohol continues to remain the drug of choice for our youth. The MTF survey noted that 5% of 8th graders, 15% of 10th graders and 27% of 12th graders reported being drunk in the past 30 days. We now know that drinking can damage the adolescent brain and increase the likelihood of addiction in addition to many other negative consequences. Here are some key points:

1. **Enforcement of our liquor laws is crucial to preventing sales to minors.** When I became director of the Oregon Liquor Control Commission, sales of alcohol to minors were commonplace. In some locations, 80% of the outlets failed compliance checks. But as enforcement became routine and licensees made greater efforts to train and supervise clerks, rates improved substantially. Enforcement is effective in preventing illegal sales and it reinforces the message that our communities take this issue seriously.
2. **Parent actions are crucial.** While parents often feel they have lost their influence, that is rarely the case. Youth care deeply about their parents' opinions. The GfK Roper Youth Report has consistently found that the vast majority of youth cite their parents as the leading influence in their decision to drink (or do drugs). Parents can effectively reduce the risk of alcohol and drug involvement by having clear rules against drinking and drug use, monitoring activities and applying reasonable consequences. We also know from several studies that allowing kids to drink at home and hosting drinking parties are not safe practices. These actions just give kids permission to drink . . . at home and elsewhere.
 1. **Advertising, sales practices, products and merchandising encourage youth to drink.** It's not just advertising. It's the fact that alcohol products and promotional messages are ubiquitous in our culture. I've found them on t-shirts, on caps, in poster stores, at civic baseball fields, and extensively in grocery stores. Recently, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued recommendations about the problems of increasing alcohol availability by adding more outlets and hours/days of sale. These things are known to increase consumption and alcohol problems. We also know that cheap alcohol induces higher consumption. As our retail outlets have become increasingly competitive, alcohol is cheaper than ever. And, products that are downright dangerous are way too available. I recently found a 24 ounce can of flavored malt beverage with 12% alcohol for \$1.99. Alcohol advertising and promotion are found throughout our culture and make our jobs ever more difficult.
 2. **It's a collective responsibility.** Remember the report, "Reducing Underage Drinking: a Collective Responsibility"? In that landmark study, the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine emphasized that we all have a role to play if we are serious about reducing this problem. Law enforcement and regulators must continue to enforce our alcohol laws. Courts need to ensure fair treatment and adequate consequences for liquor law violations. Parents must effectively supervise their children. Those who sell alcohol must do so in a responsible way that does not encourage young people to drink. As community members, we must actively support effective policies as well as treatment and recovery programs. We must educate youth and adults. We must do all we can or we risk losing the potential of too many

youth to death and injury, the trauma of sexual abuse, teen pregnancy, and addiction. Finally, we must continue to search for and implement new and more effective ways to reduce underage drinking.

Our collective efforts are needed to ensure our children's future! *Isabela Cortes, my granddaughter* For more information, see www.healthyalcoholmarket.com

<<http://www.healthyalcoholmarket.com>>

or

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