

Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services

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UNDERAGE DRINKING CAMPAIGN TO FOCUS ON PREVENTION, COMPLIANCE DURING HIGH-RISK PERIOD

The Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services' Statewide Prevention Network is partnering with law enforcement agencies to protect our state's youth at a time when underage drinking is traditionally extremely high.

The "Underage Drinking: You've Got 2 Much 2 Lose" enforcement campaign, slated for April 9-19, will focus on youth drinking prevention through both prevention activities and compliance checks.

"Underage drinking is a major problem in Oklahoma," said ODMHSAS Commissioner Terri White. "Far too many youth are harming themselves as a result of underage drinking."

ODMHSAS contracts with the Alcoholic Beverage Laws Enforcement Commission (ABLE) as part of its "2M2L" underage drinking compliance program, and funds a statewide network of 17 Regional Prevention Coordinators (RPCs) that work with communities on issues such as underage drinking, suicide prevention and prescription drug abuse prevention.

"RPCs work within their communities to find local solutions to these problems based on community-level risk factors and needs," White said. "Throughout the campaign period, which coincides with prom events across the state, RPCs will host prevention activities such as 'reality parties,' and work with law enforcement to enforce underage drinking laws, including compliance checks, DUI enforcement and social host law enforcement."

RPCs were essential in advocating for passage of the state's Social Host Law, also known as "Cody's Law," in 2011, which imposes fines or jail time for adults or minors who provide a location for kids under age 21 to drink alcohol, White noted.

"In many instances, parents, retailers or other young adults are the source of alcohol for youth," she added. "More than a third of Oklahoma public high school students (grades 9-12) currently use alcohol. These young people are obviously getting alcohol someplace. That is why we must continue to draw attention to illegal sales and consumption of alcohol and hold accountable those who willingly break the law."

The younger a person is when he or she starts using alcohol or drugs, the greater the risk of alcohol problems later in life.

“In Oklahoma, the average first-time use of alcohol is age 12,” said White. “Studies have shown that kids who begin drinking before age 15 are five times more likely to develop alcohol dependence as adults than those who begin drinking at age 21, so that is of major concern.”

Also, in Oklahoma:

- Underage drinkers account for just over 20% of all alcohol consumed in Oklahoma.
- Nearly 70% of 12th graders have used alcohol; 40% have used it within the past 30 days.
- 33.4% of Oklahoma public high school students in grades 9-12 are current drinkers.
- 24.1% of 12th graders have ridden in a car with someone drinking alcohol in the past 30 days.
- In 2010, about \$831 million was spent in Oklahoma as a result of underage drinking, whether from car accidents, unintended pregnancies, school dropouts, etc.

Parents play a key role in preventing underage alcohol use. “You may not think your kids are listening to you, but they are,” White said. Clear communication about the negative effects of alcohol, as well as about parental expectations, have been found to significantly decrease alcohol use in teens. Adequate parental supervision also helps.

“Both spring and summer are risky times for youth and alcohol use, with prom, graduation and other celebrations,” she added. “Establish curfews, monitor your teen’s activities, clearly communicate your expectations for no alcohol use under 21, and do not provide alcohol to youth. In today’s world of social media, it also helps to be in touch with other parents to keep each other up-to-date on plans.”

Parents who are concerned a child may be abusing alcohol or other substances can call the department’s “REACHOUT” hotline at 1-800-522-9054 for information or referral services. The agency’s website at <http://www.ok.gov/odmhsas/> also contains resources related to underage substance abuse prevention, as well as a map and contact information for the Statewide Prevention Network, http://ok.gov/odmhsas/documents/RPC%20Network%20Map_1%2016%2015.pdf.

“The sooner you recognize the problem, the sooner you can seek help,” White said. “Prevention efforts will save lives and avert the impact of negative consequences that go hand-in-hand with underage drinking. We can work together to prevent the problem now, or we can pay for the consequences later. To me, it is a simple choice.”

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