

FACT SHEET
As of October 2006

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*North Rural Prevention
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*San Diego County Friday
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*San Diego County Law
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*San Diego County Policy
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Center for Prevention of High Risk Drinking
Social Access Workgroup

Social Host laws needed to protect local youth, reduce underage drinking

Most municipalities throughout San Diego county have passed the so-called “house Party,” or “Social Host” law, a law crafted to address one of the root causes of underage drinking: social access to alcohol. The intent is to hold everyone – minors and adults – accountable for hosting underage drinking parties.

Background

By 2003, 15 municipalities in the region had adopted laws that made it a misdemeanor to host parties where alcohol is served to minors. Earlier this year, San Marcos became the 16th municipality in the region to establish a Social Host Law.

In 2004, a Superior Court appeals panel ruled that San Diego’s law was too broadly worded, a decision that resulted in curtailed enforcement throughout the county. Following that decision, city attorneys worked to amend the ordinances. In 2006, San Diego, La Mesa and the County of San Diego strengthened their laws, which had become vulnerable following appeals panel ruling in 2004.

According to health advocates tracking these ordinances, many of our region’s municipalities still need to revamp their ordinances for the same reason, but have yet to do so.

New Model Law

Professionals in the drug and alcohol prevention community are hailing the revised law and asking those municipalities who have not adopted it or updated it to take action now.

“We need to give police and city officials the tools they need to deal with the community’s legitimate health and safety concerns,” said Patty Drieslein, coordinator for the Center for Prevention of High Risk Drinking, a county funded initiative working to reduce binge and underage drinking.

“By strengthening our social host laws, we are saying very clearly, “We are going to hold all persons – minors and adults – accountable when it comes to hosting underage-drinking parties.” Drieslein said.

A strong social host ordinance requires party hosts to take reasonable steps to prevent minors from consuming alcohol at their parties; verify their age, control the access and/or quantity of alcohol and to supervise minors. It also bars minors from drinking on private as well as public property and holds them accountable for hosting underage drinking parties, just as adults are. Further, it calls for mandatory minimum fines and allows for the city to recover the costs associated with enforcement.

“That’s an important piece to this,” said Judy Walsh-Jackson, Associate Director of the San Diego County Policy Panel on Youth Access to Alcohol. “What that means is that those of us who obey the law don’t have to pay for someone else’s illegal and irresponsible behavior.”

Improved Law

New language has strengthened several Social Host laws. Changes include:

- Violations may be prosecuted criminally, civilly and/or administratively.
- Mandatory minimum fines on a first offense.
- Any section of ordinance shall not apply if prohibited or preempted by state or federal law.
- Establishing four duties for party hosts:
 1. To verify the age of guests;
 2. To control access to alcohol;
 3. To control the quantity of alcohol at the gathering;
 4. And to supervise minors.

Source: Social Host Workgroup

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About the Center for Prevention of High Risk Drinking:

CFPHRD is made up of a coalition of county-funded prevention groups, health advocates and law enforcement. The center uses a multi-system, multi-agency approach to reduce the impact of binge and underage drinking in San Diego County.

About the Social Access Workgroup:

The Social Access Workgroup is one of four groups working to advance common-sense alcohol risk management policies in San Diego County. The group is advocating for increased enforcement of laws pertaining to underage drinking and social sources that contribute to it.

Key Facts:

Alcohol-related collisions in San Diego County

The rate of alcohol-involved collisions resulting in an injury or death (for all ages) is on the rise. It has increased by 5.3% from 1998 to 2004 in San Diego County.

For 2002-2004 combined:

- 18-25 year olds comprised 35.4% of all alcohol-involved injuries and deaths.
- 18-25 year olds comprised 36.8% of the individuals who were under the influence and responsible for the traffic collisions. In comparison, this demographic represents only 12.6% of the total San Diego County population.

-Source: California Highway Patrol SWITRS data.

Fact Sheet

Experts from across the country say that social host laws such as this are critical to keep young people safe. Alcohol is their drug of choice and sadly statistics show they are largely getting it from social sources, experts say.

One local study of first-offenders found that 70 percent of young people get their alcohol from friends and family, according to research conducted by Beth Sise, Director of Trauma Prevention Physician Education & Research at Scripps Mercy Hospital and Chair of the Policy Panel on Youth Access to Alcohol.

The Threat

Statistics like this are troubling, given that alcohol is the leading cause of death among teenagers. Research tells us alcohol is involved in the deaths of more teens than all other illicit drugs combined — by a four-to-one ratio.

In addition, underage drinking is a factor in nearly half of all teen automobile crashes. It has a role in 50 to 65 percent of all youth suicides and is linked to as many as two thirds of all sexual assaults. Youth who begin drinking alcohol before age 15 are four times more likely to become dependent on alcohol than those who wait until age 21.

“Statistics like this are frightening,” said Charissa McAfee, previous Director of Mothers Against Drunk Driving, San Diego. “When you stop and think: kids typically start using alcohol at age 13, and then they have to face all these additional threats – and they are threats – it just floors me. That’s why we need to be aggressive when it comes to situations that promote underage drinking, including house parties.”

A Costly Problem

The toll of underage drinking in California — including traffic crashes, violent crime, burns, drowning, suicide attempts, fetal alcohol syndrome, alcohol poisonings and treatment — is more than \$6.5 billion per year, according to the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation.

In the City of San Diego, 7,519 law enforcement calls to home parties were documented in 2001, many of them involving alcohol and underage drinking. The expense to taxpayers for thousands of hours of police service is conservatively estimated to be several hundred thousand dollars.

County residents support policy changes that help prevent alcohol problems. A local poll released in March of 2002 found that more than six out of seven residents consider underage drinking in the region a serious concern.

Today, 15 cities and the County of San Diego have “social host” ordinances in place to hold hosts accountable for unsupervised parties where minors are drinking, to mitigate the problems associated with those parties, reduce the number of police hours expended on responding to such parties and deter would-be party hosts.

“Laws like this give cities greater control over private parties where underage drinking occurs,” McAfee said. “And they serve as a significant deterrent to hosting the parties in the first place.”

House Party Law: Where and when they were approved

Poway	Oct. 2002
San Diego	May 2003
Oceanside	May 2003
San Diego County	July 2003
La Mesa	May 2003
Encinitas	June 2003
El Cajon	May 2003
Escondido	May 2003
Imperial Beach	Sept. 2003
Solana Beach	Oct. 2003
National City	Nov. 2003
Vista	Oct. 2003
Santee	Aug. 2003
Lemon Grove	Aug 2003
Coronado	Sept. 2003
San Marcos	Feb. 2006

Source: County of San Diego