

Alcohol citations are set to decrease for a second year in a row

By ANNE JUNGEN ajungen@lacrossetribune.com and KJ LANG klang@lacrossetribune.com

Posted: Sunday, November 15, 2009 12:15 am

Community groups and agencies fighting La Crosse's alcohol problem aren't declaring victory but say a decrease in alcohol citations indicate their strategy is working.

Total alcohol violations, including drunken driving and public intoxication tickets, are on pace to decline for a second straight year, with 2,008 citations issued through October, according to La Crosse police.

That compares with 2,523 last year and 2,624 in 2007.

"It provides hope that all the efforts that are being done with our various community partners are starting to pay dividends," La Crosse police Capt. Rob Abraham said of the numbers.

Departments, organizations and agencies fighting the cause readily rattle off contributing factors but dodge accepting credit for the trend.

Nor were they willing to credit the decline to one or two reasons.

"The word seems to have gotten around that you have to drink responsibly and watch out for friends," Abraham said.

Why the decline?

The recognition of the city's alcohol problem — spurred by the 2006 river drowning of a local college student with a 0.32 percent blood-alcohol level— encouraged agency partnerships and spawned coalitions aimed at risky drinking behavior.

"Everybody just all of a sudden is coming together and saying we each need to do our part," Abraham said.

Community agencies and the city's colleges continue to spread the responsible drinking message.

Pat Ruda and Al Bliss, leaders of the local Changing the Culture of Risky Drinking Behavior coalition, attribute the decline to more discussion and education on alcohol use.

That led to policy changes such as expanding compliance checks on underage alcohol sales countywide, Ruda said.

"It sends a message across our county that we don't want underage people drinking," she said.

Other coalition efforts include:

- A March 2008 town hall meeting on underage access to alcohol that drew 215 people;
- Work to standardize keg registration policies across the county;
- Ensuring area festivals use best practices such as regularly checking IDs;
- Compared policies at area colleges to other higher education institutions nationwide;
- Awarded grants to get young people involved, as well as college students to design YouTube videos on risky drinking.

"I think that we have great cooperation in this county, with many agencies and that is greatly sought after in other parts of the state," Ruda said.

The start of Operation: River Watch and creation of the city's public intoxication citation, along with its alcohol education classes, may have contributed to the decline as well, police said.

“Enforcement does act as a deterrent,” Abraham said.

The police department also now works with the La Crosse County Tavern League to offer bartenders free responsible server training.

Friction between the tavern league and the police department and mayor’s office eased when Matt Harter was elected as La Crosse mayor in April, said Tavern League President Mike Brown. The tavern league supported the underdog candidate who ousted Mark Johnsrud.

“We had our issues and problems, and I think we agreed we will disagree on some issues but had the same goal, which was public safety,” Brown said.

The tavern league paid about \$88,000 in 2008 for 10,643 rides through its Safe Ride program, Brown said.

“The tavern league is working very, very hard to keep the community safe,” he said.

The recession might be acting as a curb as well: Taverns countywide are reporting a 20 percent decline in sales from last year, Brown said.

“It’s been very, very rough on local establishments,” he said.

Drinkers also are swapping microbrews for less expensive beers, Brown said.

Local liquor retailers at the same time report steady sales. Less expensive products in particular are becoming more popular, said Quillin’s grocery store owner Phil Quillin.

“Everyone is watching their pocketbook,” he said. “The \$2.99 wine, that’s the one that’s really selling.”

Retailers, however, hesitate to conclude the recession perhaps is persuading people to drink more cheaply at home instead of shelling out for a bar tab.

Skeptics see slow change.

While early signs appear positive, coalition leaders are skeptical of drawing too much from the statistics.

“It’s going to take a long time to show a change in culture,” Bliss said.

The coalition only recently put into action a five-year strategic plan to combat risky drinking among ages 12 to 24.

The plan, which took a year before being completed in August 2008, is being carried out by two groups — one focused on underage drinking, the other on harm reduction — through two grants totaling \$415,500.

“Those are not things,” Ruda said, “you can accomplish in a year.”