

A few tips for those who serve liquor

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MILFORD — Colleen Birney has worked in the restaurant business for nearly a decade, so there's little the Milford resident doesn't know about proper alcohol-serving practices.

A bartender at Nello's Lacantina, Birney considers herself a good and knowledgeable server. But even she was "surprised" that it was legal in the state of Connecticut for parents to purchase alcohol for their underage children in a licensed restaurant.

That piece of information was one of many doled out during an alcohol-server training session Saturday morning at SBC Brewery & Restaurant. The event, sponsored by the Wine & Spirits Wholesalers of Connecticut Inc. was designed to teach bartenders, waitstaff, managers and other employees of local bars and restaurants how to prevent intoxication, underage-drinking and drunken driving among their customers.

Kathryn Glendon, community program manager for the organization, said this was the first of a series of such events her agency plans to sponsor in the state. "Our wholesalers don't want to serve to underagers," Glendon said. "It's not their goal. It's not their intention."

The training program taught Saturday in Milford is known as Training for Intervention Procedures, or TIPS. Employees who successfully complete the program become TIPS-certified, and that certification is valid in establishments all over the country for several years. The more TIPS-certified employees a bar or restaurant has, the lower its liability insurance rates usually are.

During the three-hour program, Lorrie Driscoll and Joyce Macaуда of the Birmingham Group in Ansonia taught participants how to recognize the signs of intoxication, stop serving to the intoxicated and recognize and deal with underage drinkers. Driscoll, a prevention coordinator at Birmingham, has taught TIPS sessions for eight years and runs three or four a year.

At the session's start, she stressed to participants that TIPS isn't about teaching abstinence. "I'm not here to tell you that people shouldn't be drinking," she said.

Instead, the training was about teaching acceptable standards of practice for serving alcohol. Students were shown a video on the four main "behavioral cues" of intoxication: Loss of inhibitions, impaired judgment, slowed reactions and poor coordination. They were also taught the different factors that affect a person's alcohol tolerance including body size and body-fat ratio.

Driscoll recommended that servers keep a log of incidents where they had to refuse service, in case a patron gets into an accident, and there is legal action.

The seminar dealt with underage drinking as well. Driscoll recommended asking for two pieces of photo identification, particularly from young-looking customers, to ensure that they are of age.

"There are so many types of forged licenses, it's hard to tell what a fake ID looks like," she said.

If a server is handed two pieces of ID that look legitimate, but still is suspicious, they can ask the customer to sign an age statement form, stating that they are of age. The form can protect the establishment from liability if it turns out the patron really is a minor, Driscoll said.

She told the class that punishments for serving to minors include liquor license suspension, fines or jail time, in addition to job-loss. Students also learned more about Connecticut's alcohol regulations. Most participants knew basic information, such as the state's Blood Alcohol Content limit for drinking while driving (.08), and the legal ages to drink (21) and serve (18) alcohol in the state.

But many didn't know some of the more obscure regulations in the state. For instance, few in attendance knew that servers in Connecticut aren't supposed to confiscate a license or other identification, even if they have reason to believe it's fake.

Instead, Driscoll said, the server is supposed to hold the license and contact the police.

Some of the servers did know that parents can purchase alcohol for their children but a few, including Birney, didn't. Driscoll said, despite that regulation, restaurants aren't required to serve alcohol purchased for a child by a parent, and many establishments have house rules against it.

About 30 employees from area bars and restaurants attended the training session.