

STOP grants target underage drinking

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<http://www.nepsy.com/articles/leading-stories/stop-grants-target-underage-drinking/>

Citing underage drinking as a “serious and persistent public health problem, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) awarded 81 grants totaling \$15.1 million aimed at preventing and reducing alcohol use in 12 to 20 year olds. Thirteen New England agencies received the Sober Truth on Preventing Underage Drinking Act (STOP) grants.

Neill Miner, project director for Healthy Communities of the Capital area in Gardiner, Maine explains that his agency plans to use the grant for a combination of strategic efforts. “We will enhance law enforcement and reach out and create stronger partnerships with other groups, such as the district attorney’s office, schools, retailers, and those who plan public events,” he says.

According to Miner, the South Kennebec County law enforcement task force, comprising six agencies, has created a plan and will distribute information through the media about the risks and consequences of underage alcohol use. He explains that the key strategy will involve three components: increased enforcement at public events where underage drinking typically takes place; better response to underage drinking parties; and more compliance checks on and off premises at area liquor retailers.

Additional tactics include alcohol retailer and responsible beverage server training and “diversion” in which underage drinkers will be given the option to take a 12-hour skill building class at a cost of \$80. If they successfully complete the class, the \$250 fine and police record will be erased, Miner says. The grant will also help strengthen school regulations.

“What excites me about this grant is that we’ve been doing the basics for quite a while,” says Miner. “The extra funds allow us to be more collaborative and take a broader approach.”

Another grant recipient, the Berkshire United Way will focus efforts on Pittsfield, Mass., according to Karen Cole, coordinator of youth development. Based on data gathered from a bi-annual survey of students in grades 8, 10 and 12, the agency has devised a number of strategies aimed at reducing particular risk factors, she says.

“Basically, the kids report that they’re getting the message that drinking is the norm. They feel adults and institutions favor that norm,” Cole says.

To overcome this mindset, the United Way will affix student-designed stickers that clearly state the illegality of providing alcohol to underage individuals to multi-packs of alcohol. “We will do this around prom and graduation time,” Cole says.

Twice a year, the agency will implement “shoulder taps.” Underage students with an adult supervisor and police officer nearby for safety will ask liquor store patrons to purchase alcohol for them. Those who refuse receive a card thanking them and those who agree receive a leaflet explaining the penalty for this infraction, Cole says.

Also, the agency will conduct alcohol purchase surveys to ensure that retailers are checking identification and TIPS training (Training for Intervention Procedures) will teach alcohol sellers how to determine if an ID is acceptable or falsified, how to deal with a belligerent or intoxicated patron and other related issues.

Cole adds that the agency, in collaboration with other community partners, will support alcohol-free youth events such as sober dances, talent shows and open mic nights.

Youth and Family Services of Haddam-Killingworth in Conn. will use its STOP grant to boost existing activities, according to Cheryl Chandler, the agency's executive director. "We've been educating the community as to why we need to be concerned about this. It's not just drinking and driving," she says, adding that sexual assault, the presence of other drugs at parties where alcohol is served and brain damage are additional risk factors.

Additional activities will spotlight the social host law, which makes it illegal for parents to knowingly host a party with alcohol whether or not they are on the premises. Chandler's agency will work with Connecticut state police to ramp up enforcement of the law.

Also, the campaign will work toward limiting saturation advertising that influences youth drinking. Chandler explains that local liquor stores and restaurants have voluntarily curtailed signage promoting drink specials; she is hoping to form a partnership with local bars.

Katherine Glendon, TIPS trainer and prevention coordinator for Healthy Communities/Healthy Kids, works with Chandler's agency and notes that alcohol packaging and fruit flavored beverages target youth. "The culture is different now. Parents don't realize how much kids are drinking," she says. "There's a greater percentage of difficulties if kids begin drinking before the age of 15."

To be eligible for the STOP grants, agencies must have already received a Drug Free Communities grant. Each \$48,000 grant is renewable for three years, providing reporting requirements are met.