

Alcohol servers learn to spot tipsy patrons

by RACHEL KIRKPATRICK

From the Redding Pilot, Georgetown, CT:

Serving alcohol involves more than just mixing a drink or pouring a glass of wine. For those in the restaurant business, it also means becoming educated about the latest liquor liability laws and the consequences if they are not followed.

Last Thursday, a group of bartenders, wait staff and managers of local establishments attended alcohol server training at the Redding Community Center. It was sponsored by Redding Police Chief Douglas Fuchs, the police chiefs of Brookfield and Newtown, and the Wine and Spirit Wholesalers of Connecticut.

Alcohol server training, also known as "TIPS" (training for prevention procedures), is a skills-based program designed to prevent intoxication, underage drinking and drunk driving.

The courses are offered year-round throughout the state.

"Education and enforcement are two very powerful tools to reduce underage drinking, but the only true way to reduce the number of tragedies associated with underage drinking is to limit the supply of alcoholic beverages to minors," Chief Fuchs said in a press release. "This partnership between permittees and law enforcement is a step toward achieving this goal."

He and First Selectman Natalie Ketcham stopped by the session to show their support.

According to the National Transportation Safety Board, in 2006 an estimated 13,470 people were killed in traffic crashes that involved at least one driver with a blood alcohol concentration of 0.08% or above.

"The first step is you all," Chief Fuchs told the group, when it comes to preventing alcohol-related accidents and underage drinking.

Approximately 70% of adults over the age of 21 drink alcohol, said Hugh Cochrane, prevention coordinator with Also-Cornerstone Inc., who led the program. "Out of that 70%, there is a percentage that shouldn't be drinking at all," he added.

For more than 13 years Mr. Cochrane has taught teenagers, college students and adults about the effects of alcohol.

"It's a great program if it's used correctly," Mr. Cochrane said. "Everyone can get something out of it."

Chris Bruno, owner of Chris's American Restaurant in Brookfield, agreed.

"Everybody who has come really likes it," he said.

The program aims to educate servers on liquor liability lawsuits, and on the prevention of property damage caused by intoxicated patrons. Those who take the course are updated on the latest alcohol laws, and receive tips on handling difficult situations and recognizing signs of intoxication.

"Your job is not to serve someone alcohol who already appears to be intoxicated, or gets to a point of intoxication while they're in your establishment," Mr. Cochrane said.

"The results of a study co-sponsored by the U.S. Government and General Motors Corporation showed that customers served by a TIPS-trained staff are less likely to become intoxicated than those served by a non TIPS-trained staff," a press release said.

Often employers require wait staff to complete the course because ultimately the responsibility of preventing alcohol-related injury or death falls on the shoulders of the establishment.

Insurance rates generally triple if an establishment serves alcohol, Mr. Cochrane said.

“A few of these,” he said, pretending a drink was in his hand, “can change a lot of people.”

In the state of Connecticut, the seller or server (including licensees) of alcohol to an intoxicated person can be held liable for any injuries the person inflicts on one or more people. The maximum penalty if more than one person is injured by the intoxicated person is \$250,000. Under the Connecticut Dram Shop Act, which addresses negligence, the statute of limitations is one year from the date of the incident.

To prevent costly lawsuits, servers can prove they used “reasonable effort” to prevent intoxication. This could mean providing food, calling a cab or enlisting the help of a guest.

Anything, Mr. Cochrane said, to “keep them off the road.”

Servers can also require a patron to sign a contract that legally verifies they are of age. Servers have the right to call police if someone threatens another life in an establishment and they also have the right to refuse any license or photo I.D.

Mr. Cochrane told the group to recognize signs of intoxication, such as loud behavior and forgetfulness. He also provided helpful facts; for example, alcohol mixed with the gases of a seltzer or tonic beverage “is like an express train right into the blood stream,” he said.

The most important fact he stressed to the group when serving alcohol is to prolong the time between a patron’s last drink and when he or she leaves to drive home.

“Serve coffee hot,” he said, because the only way to lower the amount of alcohol in the blood is time.