

# Program on social host law outlines risks and liabilities

By Janet Hefler  
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Some parents believe they may legally serve alcohol to their teen children and friends at home, as long as they confiscate car keys and no one is allowed to drive. They are wrong.

Or, imagine the parents who return to their home from an evening out or an off-Island trip and surprise a house full of drunken teenagers. Could they be held liable under the state's social host law? They could be.

Other situations may be more ambiguous. For example, what if, during a holiday party, a cooler of beer meant for adult guests is left where teens can serve themselves. Is the host responsible?

To help the Island community understand the law, attorney Mark J. Hoover will present "Be a Parent, Not a Pal" on Thursday, Dec. 10, from 7-8:30 pm, at the Hebrew Center on Pine and Center streets in Vineyard Haven.

Mr. Hoover, a 1983 graduate of Martha's Vineyard Regional High School (MVRHS), is a member of the Boston law firm Campbell, Campbell, Edwards, and Conroy. "Be a Parent, Not a Pal" is a multimedia program designed by another of the firm's attorneys, Richard P. Campbell, to educate students, parents, teachers and members of the community about the social host law and to illustrate the legal consequences of allowing those under the age of 21 to possess alcoholic beverages.

Mr. Hoover and five other attorneys in his firm have joined Mr. Campbell to make the presentation to several school and community groups every year, as a public service. According to the law firm's press release, the program includes the stories of victims who suffered the consequences of underage drinking, as well as hosts who were prosecuted under the Social Host Law. The presentation also addresses the liability of social hosts when civil actions with millions of dollars at stake rapidly follow criminal prosecutions.

The Dukes County Health Council Youth Task Force (YTF) is the program host. After Mr. Hoover gave a similar presentation in June, many people sought information on the topic, and he agreed to return, YTF program coordinator Theresa Manning said.

(See "Allowing underage drinking creates huge liability for adults," June 11, MV Times).

"Our goal is to educate the entire Island community about the importance of not providing underage kids with access to the use of alcohol," Ms. Manning said. "We know that we're battling a statistically challenging issue. But in addition to educating kids about the importance of being safe, it comes down to accessibility to alcohol in our community."

## Long a concern here

The issue of underage drinking has been an ongoing concern for the Island community, against the backdrop of many alcohol-related incidents involving teens - from fatal auto

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accidents to drinking parties that have ended with police issuing citations and making arrests.



Underage drinking is a focus for the YTF. The Island coalition is made up of youth leaders, health practitioners, health care and social service organizations, public officials, educators, law enforcement officers, parents, and community members who promote health and wellness for youth between 12 to 20 years old. The YTF has secured multi-year state and federal grants totaling nearly \$1 million to combat drug and alcohol abuse among Island youth.

### **Risk behavior surveys and alcohol use**

In February 2007, the YTF conducted a youth risk behavior survey, in collaboration with the Martha's Vineyard Public Schools and the Southeast Center for Healthy Communities in Brockton. The YTF administered similar versions of the risk behavior study, based on one from the Centers for Disease Control, to students in grades 6 through 12 in Island schools in 2000, 2002, and 2005.

Alcohol was reported as the most used drug in results from the 2007 risk behavior survey, which included responses from 855 Island students in grades 7 through 12. Alcohol use was acknowledged by 55 percent of Island high school students compared to 48 percent in Massachusetts and 43 percent nationwide. However, while alcohol use increased slightly from 53.9 percent in 2005, it showed a decrease from 57.7 percent in 2002 and 63.6 percent in 2000. The survey also found that most local teenagers got alcohol through friends and through their own homes, not by buying it with false identification.

### **Make a pledge**

With all this in mind, in September this year, the YTF launched a Martha's Vineyard Safe Homes Pledge program. Parents and guardians in about 1,100 Island households with students in grades 7 to 12 received a pledge document asking them to agree not to allow alcoholic beverages or other drugs to be served to minors at parties or activities in their homes.

The pledge also asks parents and guardians to agree to actively chaperone parties at their homes, alert other parents and guardians about any child that is or appears to be under the influence of drugs or alcohol in their homes, and welcome such notification about their own children. Ms. Manning said the Safe Home Pledge campaign continues.

The YTF is funded by a grant from the Massachusetts Department of Public Health Bureau of Substance Abuse Services and a Drug-Free Communities grant from the Federal government. The coalition also sponsors alcoholic beverage server training, alcohol compliance checks, and "sticker shock" campaigns warning people against purchasing alcohol for underage drinkers.

### **Sticker shock campaign**

During the YTF's most recent "sticker shock" campaign on November 21, volunteers and Island package store employees placed about 5,000 bright orange stickers on bags and cases of beer to encourage adults to "think twice" about buying alcohol for minors. The stickers outline the possible criminal penalties for violating the state's law, a \$2,000 fine, one-year jail term, or suspension of a driver's license for six months.

All of the Island's package stores participated. "We're very impressed with the cooperation of package stores here," Ms. Manning said, noting that the YTF has talked with groups doing similar work around the country. "It really helps having 100 percent participation, because it sends an important message that this is something people care

about."

The YTF's latest project, a high school parent survey, will be launched soon online at a website to be announced. Ms. Manning said an upcoming advertisement by the YTF in The Times will provide a link to the online survey. Parents on the Safe Home Pledge list will be notified by email.

"The purpose of the survey is to find out from parents what they need support with and what they think the concerns and issues are that need to be addressed," Ms. Manning said. "We really want to hear from as many as possible, because our programs are tailored specifically to what is needed here on Martha's Vineyard."

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