

## Social host laws

Alcohol is the most dangerous drug for school-age children – by far. More adolescents and teens die from alcohol than from all other illegal drugs combined. Kids get their hands on alcohol in two ways: They illegally purchase it or an adult or other youth provides it to them. About half of all underage drinking is attributable to social sources. So, laws against selling alcohol to minors aren't enough. We need laws and enforcement against providing alcohol to minors in social settings.

That's why the California State PTA endorses "social host" laws, and passed a resolution in 2009 for all its units, councils and districts to encourage and support legislation to adopt social host laws that prohibit providing alcohol or allowing the consumption of alcohol in homes and on noncommercial property by youth under 21 who are not the children of parents who own or rent the property. In general, social host laws hold parents and other adults responsible for underage drinking parties in their homes.

Underage drinking is directly involved in the deaths of about 5,000 young people every year nationwide, and it is linked to two-thirds of all sexual assaults involving date rape, while contributing to a 10 times higher incidence of physical assault and a 12 times higher incidence of unintentional injury.

Underage drinking also is linked to failure in school and poor school performance overall. Research shows that alcohol use impairs memory in the young, developing brain at a much higher level than in the adult brain, and particularly harms cognitive abilities such as attention. Young drinkers also face much higher risks of alcohol problems later in life. A national survey of more than 43,000 adults found that 47 percent who began drinking before age 14 became alcohol dependent later in life, compared to 9 percent of those who waited until age 21.

Social host laws are being passed by cities and counties throughout the country. The reasons why are clear:

- **The most frequent sources of alcohol** for teens include family members, friends, adult purchasers, and parties
- **Family members** are the most frequent source of alcohol for adolescents
- **Two out of three teenagers** say it is easy to get alcohol from their homes
- **One-third of teens** say it is easy to obtain alcohol from their own consenting parents
- **Two out of five teenagers** said it is easy to obtain alcohol from a friend's parents
- **One in four teenagers** say they had attended a party where minors were drinking in front of parents

San Diego County has been at the forefront of the social host movement. Due to the dedicated work of the alcohol prevention community, and the support of law enforcement, the county and every city except one have passed social host laws.

A recent social host case in San Diego County illustrated the importance of these new laws. A mother hosted an end-of-the-school year party in 2009 for high school students at her home and permitted the teens to bring alcohol. One teen-age girl drank so much that she became unconscious, and the mother – who was not the mother of the girl – had to take her to the hospital, where the girl was diagnosed with alcohol poisoning. The mother was arrested for violating the county's social host law and other charges,

and sheriff's deputies went to the home to check on the welfare of the other teens. They found many other teens passed out or very sick from alcohol.

The mother eventually pleaded guilty to violating the county's social host law and was fined \$300, placed on three years probation, required to attend a Mothers Against Drunk Driving Impact Panel, and ordered to attend parenting classes. She had faced a maximum of one year in jail and fines up to \$1,000.

At about the same time, there were several high-profile incidents of young people dying in alcohol-related car crashes, and at least one occurred after an underage drinking party. As a result, the social host case received a considerable amount of local media attention.

The purpose of social host laws is not to drag parents off to jail, but to deter parents and other adults from providing alcohol to teens or from allowing teens to drink at their homes. Social host laws change the social norm of leniency toward underage drinking, so that parents and other adults recognize that it's no longer acceptable in our communities "to wink" at youth alcohol use and allow it in one's home.

Local support from PTA units, councils and districts will be very important to the success of social host initiatives. As the most respected representatives of the primary and secondary education community, PTAs can play a strong advocacy role in the adoption of social host laws at city councils and county boards of supervisors. PTA units, councils and districts also can help local law enforcement and the courts by supporting police and prosecutors in enforcing these laws in their communities.

To learn about social host laws in your area, contact your county alcohol and drug program administrator.

