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Don't be tricked this Halloween; hosting an underage drinking party is no treat

Many local cities are adopting stronger laws to protect youth.

Halloween has always been a popular holiday for children. However, in recent years, it has also developed a substantial following among older folks. In 2008, for example, two out of three adults between the ages 18-24 planned to throw or attend a Halloween party, according to The National Retail Federation.

But Halloween parties for adults involve more than just costumes and candy. Such festivities oftentimes include the consumption of alcohol, which is known to cause problems when excessive or underage drinking takes place. Research shows that alcohol related incidents are the leading cause of death among American youth, including nearly half of all fatal teen automobile crashes. As such, it is involved in the deaths of more teens than all other illicit drugs combined — by a ratio of four to one. This creates a substantial hazard, when one considers how many kids will be out on the streets trick-or-treating this Halloween, as many as 93% of them, according to the National Confectioners Association.

What makes this particular Halloween even more problematic is that it falls on a Saturday, which according to Beth Mosher of the Automobile Association of America, increases safety concerns all the more. “Unfortunately we see a sharp rise in the number of motor vehicle fatalities on Halloween when it is on a weekend,” said Mosher. In fact the National Transportation Safety Administration reports that the number of motor vehicle fatalities rises an average of 30% when Halloween falls on a Friday, Saturday or Sunday as compared to the other days of the week.

But there is more than drinking and driving to worry about during such a heavy party weekend. Alcohol abuse has been linked to as many as two-thirds of sexual assaults and date rapes of teens and college students. It is also a major factor in unprotected sex and other high-risk behavior among youth. And much of this takes place within the confines of a house party which, according to national as well as local research, is the primary source from which minors obtain alcohol. For example, in San Bernardino County data collected from underage DUI offenders show that 73 percent of them had their last drink at a private residence and of that, 51 percent say they were at a house party.



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These findings and other data show that underage drinking is a major problem in San Bernardino County. According to the California Healthy Kids Survey, on average, youth have their first experience with alcohol at the age of 12 and 55% indicate alcohol is easy for them to get. One of the reasons for this is that some adults, in the mistaken belief that it will be safe, actually allow minors to drink during a house party or gathering, as long as steps are taken to ensure that no one will be driving.

While it is illegal for adults to furnish alcohol to individuals under the age of 21, there are no restrictions against adults providing a place for underage drinking to occur. Additionally, enforcing the current law can be difficult. For example, when law enforcement officials arrive on the scene of an underage drinking party, they are oftentimes unable to prove who actually supplied the alcohol.

To address this problem, a growing number of cities and counties throughout California are adopting what are known as social host laws. Among them are the Counties of San Diego, Ventura, Fresno, Contra Costa, Marin, Mono and Napa. Rather than targeting the person who supplied the alcohol, such laws hold the host of an underage drinking party accountable, the property owner or the renter as the case may be.

In 2003 San Diego became one of the first cities to adopt a social host ordinance and in the following year there was an eight percent reduction in disturbance-related police calls for service. Since that time, over 50 cities throughout California have passed local social host ordinances. These include Corona, Norco, Moreno Valley and Ontario, which is the only city in San Bernardino County to have passed such a law. According to law enforcement agencies, such laws are a more effective way to address underage drinking at house parties.

Since word of the effectiveness of social host laws has spread, popular support has been growing. In a recent survey of San Bernardino County residents, conducted by regional substance abuse prevention advocates, 64 percent identified underage drinking parties as one of the three top problems in their communities and 57 percent agreed that adults should be held more accountable. In a national study, 80 percent of respondents supported increased penalties for adults who illegally provide alcohol to minors.

Given the research findings and strong support from law enforcement and local residents, several community groups and coalitions have formed to support and encourage the adoption of social host ordinances as one way to reduce underage drinking throughout San Bernardino County.