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## NEWS RELEASE

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# Law enforcement officials unite to address underage drinking

***Officials believe interagency cooperation and adoption of a Social Host ordinance are needed to reduce alcohol related incidents involving youth.***

Representatives from several mountain law enforcement agencies recently met with members of two local mountain coalitions to determine the best approach for dealing with underage drinking.

Organized by the Breakthrough Task Force, a coalition of Big Bear residents, and the Rim Youth Prevention Leadership Coalition in Running Springs, the meeting included Captain Greg Garland and Lt. Errol Bechtel of the Big Bear Sheriff station, Captain Tony Nicassio of the Twin Peaks Sheriff station and Mark Snyder, a US Forest Service law enforcement officer.

The group discussed difficulties facing law enforcement when responding to underage drinking parties and possible collaborative efforts that could be utilized to prevent them.

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.

In order to address this, mountain law enforcement officials are reviewing several Social Host accountability laws that have been passed in cities and counties throughout California and nationwide. These laws, which can impose both civil and criminal penalties, do not require law enforcement to prove who supplied the alcohol to minors, but rather who supplied the location for an underage drinking party to occur.

According to law enforcement agencies, such laws are a more effective way to address underage drinking at house parties



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“This is a collaborative effort between mountain agencies to better direct our efforts to eliminate underage access to alcohol,” said Lt. Bechtel, who is also a member of the Breakthrough Task Force

Research studies show that youth who begin drinking alcohol before age 15 are four times more likely to become dependent on alcohol than those who wait to begin drinking until age 21. Additionally, those who begin drinking before age 13 are twice as likely to have unplanned sex during college, and more than twice as likely to have unprotected sex during college, as those who do not start drinking until after age 19.

According to results of the 2008 California Healthy Kids Survey, young people in San Bernardino County first use alcohol at the age of 12.

The dangers associated with youth drinking are well documented. According to the American Medical Association’s Office of Alcohol/Drug Abuse, alcohol is the number one drug of choice for youth. It is also a contributing factor in the death of more teens than all other illicit drugs combined — by a ratio of four to one.

Unfortunately, the ease of youth accessibility to alcohol is not just a national concern but a local one as well. In a survey of 378 Big Bear youth ages 15-17, almost 40% reported that alcohol was “very easy” to get while just over 30% reported alcohol was “fairly easy” to get. The survey also showed that the number one source of alcohol for youth is house parties.

In addition to house parties, a point of concern in the mountain area is the number of underage drinking parties that take place in the national forest. In the past, because of the jurisdictional boundaries of the various law enforcement agencies that provide service to the mountain communities, only US Forest Service officials patrolled the forest. And with only one officer assigned to such duty, it was impossible to have a 24-hour law enforcement presence.

All three law enforcement agencies agree that underage drinking parties on forestry property are a major problem and have agreed to pool their resources and work collectively to break them up.

“The Forest Service was happy to participate in this effort as these problems do not stop at the borders of towns but continue into the forest as well,” said Snyder.

He went on to say, “It will be in everyone’s best interest to remember that the Social Host ordinance will be applicable within the San Bernardino National Forest that is inside San Bernardino County as well. This will give all law enforcement agencies another tool to combat underage drinking parties on national forest land.”

Mountain law enforcement officials and coalition members are currently revising existing ordinances that could then be applied to underage drinking parties that take place on forestry land. Lt. Bechtel sees the involvement of local residents such as those on the Breakthrough Task Force as an essential component.

“We are pleased and supportive of the mountain coalitions that are partnering with law enforcement to eliminate underage access to alcohol,” said Bechtel.

Residents who would like more information on what they can do to help eliminate underage drinking can contact the Breakthrough Task Force at (909) 878-0101 or the Rim Youth Prevention Leadership Coalition at (909) 336-1800.