



*Applied Research for Community Health & Safety**

NEWS RELEASE

Date: February 1, 2010
For Immediate Release

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New Coalition in Redlands

Efforts to be focused on substance abuse prevention among youth

A group of concerned citizens recently met at the Redlands Community Center to organize a new coalition that will seek to prevent problems related to alcohol, tobacco and other drug abuse. Members of the new Redlands Prevention Coalition included representatives from education, health service agencies, community-based organizations and other local residents who have been working independently on these issues for some time. They formed the coalition to coordinate their efforts in a major campaign to ensure the health and safety of local youth as well as the neighborhoods where they live.

According to one of the group's organizers, Ann Davis-Schultz, retired Coordinator of Student Services for the Redlands Unified School District and current co-chair of the Coalition for a Tobacco Free San Bernardino County, substance abuse problems in Redlands are worse than people think. "It's one of the reasons we decided to organize the coalition," she said. "If we expect to have any meaningful impact, we need to get local residents involved; so it is imperative that the community understands how big of a problem tobacco, alcohol and other drug abuse issues have become among our youth."

Another of the group's organizers, Teresa Lake, Recreational Programs Coordinator for the Redlands Community Center, agrees. "When it comes to substance abuse, many people seem to be in denial," she said.

That was one of the key findings of a recent survey conducted last year by Vista Guidance Center. When asked about the attitudes of local residents regarding alcohol and drugs, nearly half (45%) of the respondents said that lack of awareness and/or denial was a big problem.

"They just don't believe it could be happening here in Redlands," Lake said. "But if you look at the statistics, you can see that things are getting out of control."

One of the statistics that Lake is referring to is the prevalence of underage drinking at house parties in the city. With just over 70,000 residents, Redlands has about 3.5 percent of San Bernardino County's population. However, some 7 percent of underage youth arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol reported having their last drink at a house party in Redlands.

According to research studies, house parties are the primary source of alcohol for underage youth. Moreover, there is a greater likelihood of heavy drinking at these parties since young people are oftentimes encouraged by their peers to consume excessive amounts of alcohol. This can lead to a host of problems, many of them serious. In addition to motor vehicle crashes, these can include sexual assault, property damage, fights and other kinds of violence.

“We’ve had several incidents of this kind in Redlands,” said Lake. As an example she cited the case of a 16 year-old boy who was badly burned at a house party when friends set his hair on fire. “We’ve also had instances of sexual assault,” added Lake.

As a solution, the coalition is proposing what is known as a “Social or Responsible Host” ordinance. Such a law would empower police to cite the host of an underage drinking party with either a civil or criminal violation. Fines for the cost of law enforcement services needed to enforce the ordinance could also be levied against party hosts who do not comply with the law.

Rubén Robles, Associate Dean of Student Life at the University of Redlands, who attended the meeting on behalf of the university, thinks this is a good idea. He notes that when a University of Redlands student is taken to an emergency room for a drinking-related incident, that student receives a bill from the ambulance company or fire department.

“Since this practice began, we’ve seen a reduction in the number of alcohol-related incidents,” said Robles. And if the police had the same kind of authority when they have to break up a house party, he believes it would further reduce problems.

Davis-Schultz believes it’s time for a Social Host ordinance as well as other prevention policies (such as a tobacco retail licensing ordinance) be considered by the city. “For many youth substance abuse begins with the use of the ‘gateway drug’ tobacco which can lead to experimentation with inhalants, alcohol, marijuana, over the counter and prescription medication and even heroin,” said Davis-Schultz.

She also noted, “Substance abuse not only ruins lives, but it has a substantial negative effect on our community. It costs significant tax-payer dollars to have the police, as well as the school district, intervene and/or suppress illegal activities.”

According to Davis-Schultz, “What we need is a comprehensive package of prevention policies; a series of measures that, when combined together, can protect our youth and enhance the quality of life in our neighborhoods.” To help move this forward, she and the other organizers of the coalition are seeking community participation and support.

“We’d like to invite concerned residents of Redlands to join us in this effort” said Lake. “We have lots of local kids with great potential and we want to make sure they have a chance to realize it. In order to make it happen we need community participation.”

The next meeting of the Redlands Prevention Coalition will be on Thursday, February 18, at 5:30 p.m. in the Redlands Community Center, 111 W. Lugonia Ave. To get more information call Teresa Lake at (909) 798-7572.