

Community focuses on alcohol issues

It takes a community ... to educate a child, fight obesity, and address so many of the issues facing society today. One of the most pervasive problems involves underage and high-risk drinking. According to the Surgeon General's Call to Action Report, "Alcohol is the most widely used substance of abuse among America's youth." Currently, Kittitas County, as a community, is successfully addressing this issue.

Most of us recognize that alcohol problems contribute to — and complicate — many of the downtown's problems of disorderly conduct and other criminal behavior. These are quality-of-life issues that require solutions involving both the community and the university. Underage access to alcohol is one part of the problem; service to intoxicated individuals is another major factor.

An effective approach to such problems, as supported by national research, involves community partnerships. This approach is alive in the Campus-Community Coalition (CCC), a collaborative effort among stakeholders from Central Washington University and Ellensburg, including CWU students. While national studies have long affirmed the effectiveness of coalitions in reducing underage and high-risk drinking, we recently received data showing it works for us too.

In 2005-2006, CWU participated in professional research funded through a grant received by Western Washington University (WWU). Results of that study showed that Central and WWU, defined as "intervention" colleges because of our coalitions, demonstrated a steep decline in



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binge drinking rates, while the comparison university, that did not have a coalition, showed no improvement.

Other data, through the American College Health Association National College Health Assessment (spring 2008), showed that nearly 68 percent of CWU students either did not drink or drank fewer than four drinks the last time they "partied/socialized;" and almost 67 percent of students said there were no times over the past two weeks that they had five or more alcoholic drinks at a sitting. This and other surveys verify that the majority of CWU students are making healthy choices!

Thus as with most issues, there is a small minority who are creating the majority of problems associated with high-risk drinking, and who are generating most of the calls for service for our police. A recent survey in the downtown of 477 community members and CWU students (those who are going downtown to drink) revealed that of that population, 61 percent of non-students and nearly 66

percent of students said they sometimes drive after drinking four or more alcoholic beverages.

One of our coalition partners, a pioneer in community efforts to reduce underage drinking, is going the extra step toward heightened enforcement activities. The Kittitas County Community Network/Drug-Free Communities, through the Enforcing Underage Drinking Laws (EUDL) grant, has provided the funds for increased party patrols, DUI enforcement, and compliance and premise checks in businesses that sell and serve alcohol.

The EUDL grant was awarded to the Community Network by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention for the purpose of increasing awareness and reducing risk in our community. Grant funds have supported the DUI Task Force, a law enforcement interagency task force in Kittitas County, in conducting underage drinking laws emphasis patrols since fall 2007. Statistics show that between increased community education, awareness of laws, and a heightened law enforcement presence, the number of youth cited during these emphasis patrols has decreased in the last year. In spring of 2007, 204 citations were issued during emphasis patrols for crimes from driving under the influence

(DUI) to furnishing alcohol to a minor; this number dropped to 121 citations in spring 2008.

Although overall citations decreased, minor in possession (MIP) citations increased among high school students, college students and other citizens by an additional 30 citations during the six-week emphasis this spring. This is a reminder of our continued need for enforcement and ongoing education. Sergeant Koch of the Central Washington University Police Department and member of the DUI Task Force said, "Anytime you provide additional patrols focusing on a specific area you are going to get a higher number of contacts. The grant program has had a significant impact for law enforcement, allowing us to educate more people on the effect of underage drinking and to be more visible on the street. I believe that the education and the police presence has led to fewer arrests the second year, even with more police on the street."

As a community, we will continue these effective partnerships to address the issues of underage and high-risk drinking.

Lynne Harrison and Jessika Roe are coordinators of the Enforcing Underage Campus-Community Coalition Drinking Laws Grant.