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Initiative confirms underage drinking is a serious problem

Data collected by communities participating in a new initiative to reduce underage drinking confirm what law enforcement has long suspected - the problem is more serious than previously known.

Collected over five months, the figures reveal information previously unavailable. Data has been collected for several years on arrests to determine how often alcohol factors into a variety of crimes. However, because many officers cite and release underage people for alcohol offenses instead of making arrests, the exact extent of the underage drinking problem has never before been quantified.

Now, the Wyoming Communities in Action (WY-CIA) initiative tracks youth-related alcohol offense in detail. Statewide, 80 percent of underage people charged with being in possession of alcohol are cited and released, instead of arrested. Initiative managers also found that people age 18 to 20 accounted for 64 percent of the total arrests and citations. Teens age 15-17 accounted for 26 percent of the total.

WY-CIA was launched last fall by the Wyoming Association of Sheriffs and Chiefs of Police (WASCOP) to allow a case-study examination of different communities' efforts to develop, implement and track strategies to cut down on underage drinking and alcohol-related problems. WY-CIA also provides funding to help reach those goals. Each city's police department received \$10,000 to start individualized efforts as pilot communities. Those five cities are receiving an additional \$10,000 now to continue their work.

The figures and statistics, along with information-sharing and case studies among the five pilots, indicate a serious threat to public health and safety as well as a clear need to shift the focus of law enforcement, policy makers and community leaders from treating the symptoms of alcohol abuse to prevention, Powell Police Chief Tim Feathers said.

"These numbers reinforce what we have long suspected - that underage drinking is a serious problem in Powell," Chief Feathers said. "Through WY-CIA, we hope we can implement prevention and intervention strategies to cut down on underage drinking and the problems that go with it."

Alcohol abuse and drunk driving are serious problems, yet often lead to even more trouble. They increase crime rates in nearly every category, such as burglaries and domestic violence, and are detrimental to the health and safety of the general public. Alcohol abuse also devastates families and community, stressing the resources of law enforcement, social service agencies, education institutions and the judicial system.

Chief Feathers said that historically the department has worked with the Powell Coalition Against Substance Abuse, Northwest College 'Choices', and Park County School District #1

Reduce Alcohol Abuse Grant on numerous prevention and intervention strategies. As a pilot community in the WY-CIA initiative officers continue to complete compliance checks at establishments that sell alcohol. Additionally, the police department is partnering with Northwest College and the high school to coordinate a police presence at springtime activities such as prom and graduation. Chief Feathers is also working with other community organizations and PHS students to develop a calendar of messages to change social norms about youth and alcohol. These calendars will feature student developed messages on a 2008-2009 school activities calendar to be distributed to parents of students. The publishing of the calendars is to be paid for through the grant. “As a community we have made significant progress in recent years”, Chief Feathers said, “We need to see this progress as encouraging first steps. Key stake holders in the community have become engaged and are moving forward with a common purpose. In light of the serious consequences to our community of alcohol abuse at any age we need to engage these stake holders in a frank discussion on responsible community alcohol policy and how that can further reduce alcohol abuse and its impact on our community.”

Powell was one of five communities selected based on population, geography and commitment from police chiefs to pilot the 16-month case-study project. The other participating communities are Casper, Rock Springs, Gillette and Douglas.

Meanwhile, five new communities – Torrington, Rawlins, Lander, Riverton and Fremont County – will launch WY-CIA in May. The original five communities can serve as mentors while their successful projects become templates for real results.

For more information, please contact Chief Tim Feathers at 754-2212 or e-mail at tfeathers@cityofpowell.com.