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# Underage drinking in Long Beach termed a ‘public health crisis’

Though LBHS survey shows slight dip in use, numbers remain ‘staggering’

By **Anthony Rifulato**



JANETTE PELLEGRINI/HERALD

Dr. David Jernigan, the director of the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth, said that alcohol is the number one drug problem among young people in the U.S.

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“I would say easily that eight out of 10 parties where people are getting alcohol would be at someone’s house — most of the time, parents were not there,” said Russell Stein, 20, a Long Beach High School graduate and a member of Long Beach Medical Center’s Coalition Against Underage Drinking. “It was seen as stupid to go out and get your beer at a bar. The majority [of teenagers] knew that you would get caught.”

The coalition says that most minors who drink do so at friends’ houses or at parties. And in a city with more than 80 establishments within 3.5 miles where people can purchase alcohol — along with marketing of alcoholic beverages such as Joose to minors — many describe underage drinking in Long Beach as a public health crisis.

In an effort to raise awareness of the issue, the coalition held its annual town hall meeting on July 11 at the Long Beach Public Library. The forum featured guest speakers David Jernigan, Ph.D., director of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health’s Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth, who gave a presentation on the link between alcohol advertising and its impact on drinking among young people; LBMC CEO Douglas Melzer, and Police Commissioner Mike Tangney, among others.

Jernigan said that alcohol is the No. 1 drug problem among young people in the U.S., and that each year, more than 4,700 people under age 21 die of alcohol-related causes.

Since 2001, more than 1,500 minors have received summonses for possession of alcohol in Long Beach, and, according to the coalition, there were more than 40 emergency-room admissions for alcohol poisoning in 2010 involving people under 21 at the medical center.

“This is really a public health crisis that we need to band together and solve somehow,” Melzer said. “We have committed a tremendous amount of resources in responding to the issues surrounding alcohol and drug abuse.”

Judi Vining, the coalition’s coordinator, released the results of the group’s 2011 Long Beach student

survey on alcohol and drug use, initiated last fall as part of the Prevention First-NY! grant, a behavioral risk study in which the coalition participated. Of the 932 high school students surveyed, the results showed a slight dip in reported alcohol use in the previous 30 days, from 50.8 percent in 2008 to 45 percent in 2011.

Still, underage alcohol use in Long Beach remains much higher than the state average of 26.9 percent, with binge drinking more prevalent in Long Beach than in Nassau County as a whole and New York state.

“In 2008, one of the reasons we got our Prevention First-NY! grant is because we were so far above the state level for past-30-day use in alcohol,” Vining said.

Vining said that 35.3 percent of this year’s 11th-graders reported being drunk or high one to nine times in the previous 30 days, and that 37.1 percent of 11th-graders reported drinking five or more drinks one to five times within the previous two weeks.

“That’s a staggering amount of alcohol that our kids drink,” Vining said.

According to the survey, 57 percent of 11th-graders reported drinking at a friend’s home, while 21 percent drank in their own home.

“What this data means to us is that we do a pretty good job of compliance checks, the Police Department is out there ... we now need to look at where we have sent the kids,” Vining said. “We’ve sent them indoors to parties.”

Over the past decade, the coalition has made an impact in reducing drinking rates — particularly among seventh- and ninth-graders — and Vining said that the data will help the group develop additional policies and strategies.

“We have got to take a look at our community, and ourselves, and the parents of the kids who told us what they’re doing,” she said. “The collaboration in this community has gotten us to where we are today. Where we are now is a lot better than where we were 10 years ago when we started, but we still have some way to go.”

Coalition member and Long Beach Middle School Principal Michele Natali said less exposure to alcohol at home, on Irish Day and at other events is a good start.

“Not only do we have to teach the children to drink less, but the adults as well,” she said. “We need to set better examples as adults.”

What Long Beach High School students are saying:

35.3% of 11th-graders report being drunk or high 1 to 9 times in the past 30 days

37.1% of 11th-graders reported drinking five or more drinks 1 to 5 times in the past two weeks

Where Long Beach kids say they drink:

57% of 11th-graders report drinking at a friend’s home

21% drank in their own home

8.2% drank in a car