

Thanksgiving Eve biggest underage drinking night of year, local police say

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The effort to curb drunk driving is getting "smart" this year.

For the second year, a Somerset County nonprofit committed to substance abuse awareness will be paying nine local police departments to staff an extra 22 officers during what many consider the biggest night of drinking of the year — Thanksgiving Eve.

But new in this year's campaign by EmPoWER Somerset to reduce underage drinking and drunken driving is a list of local taxi services that revelers can pull up on their smartphones.

The campaign begins Wednesday night, which is widely considered one of the most deadly holidays for road travel.

North Plainfield Police Chief William G. Parenti,

the president of the Somerset County Association of Chiefs of Police, said he and his colleagues consider Thanksgiving Eve the biggest night for underage drinking.

"Kids are coming home from college and going out, or teens are getting alcohol from their older siblings who are home from college," Parenti said.

Of course, it's not just the underage who will be imbibing.

Adam Franco of 685-TAXI in Manville said Thanksgiving might be the busiest holiday for his company, which is one of the six services on the EmPoWER Somerset's "Ride Home 2nite" list.

"I'm taking calls from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. and from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. on Sunday," he said. "It does make sense to call ahead and reserve so you can get picked up. Nobody wants

to be standing outside a bar past closing time."

Last year, local police departments working with the Somerset County Prosecutor's Office and the Somerset Sheriff's Department engaged drunken driving and underage drinking in a coordinated crackdown.

EmPoWER Somerset helped pay for the overtime for officers involved in the holiday stings.

This year the organization will fund 22 officers around the county, Parenti said. The cost will vary across town lines, but Parenti said a "fair estimate" would be \$67 an hour for a four-hour shift.

In addition to pulling over drivers at checkpoints, cops will go undercover at liquor stores to catch underage people trying to buy liquor or adults who agree to buy booze for minors.

Writing in Friday's

Courier News, Somerset County Prosecutor Geoffrey D. Soriano said that using fake driver's licenses or trying to buy liquor while underage could lead to fines of up to \$1,000 and six months in jail. Driving while under the influence could lead to assault by auto charges that result in five years in prison, he said.

The list of car services will be posted at more than 15 bars in the county. The list can be accessed from a smartphone equipped to scan the square-shaped QR codes affixed to the leaflets.

Sharon Lutz, the EmPoWER Somerset executive director, said the campaign will continue through Christmas, New Year's Day and the NFL Super Bowl in January.

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