

FEATURED LETTER

Underage drinking can be a holiday scourge

This is the first in a series of letters from Somerset County officials on the dangers of underage drinking and county initiatives to help combat the problem.

As the holiday season approaches, the Somerset County Association of Chiefs of Police, in partnership with Prosecutor Geoffrey Soriano, Sheriff Frank Provenzano, and EmPoWER Somerset, would like to remind people about some of the issues often associated with school breaks and holiday parties.

It is important to remember that parties characterized by underage drinking are dealt with much more stringently than they may have been when your parents were teenagers. Strict liability laws, as well as many local ordinances, hold the hosts of underage parties accountable for the party itself as well as any damages that might occur in its aftermath. Police who encounter these parties will not only shut them down, but must account for each and every minor who exhibits signs of impairment; our officers will spend all of the time necessary to release juveniles to their parents, regardless of the time of day.

The police, of course, are not always called to the scene of an underage party until something tragic has occurred. Every year, scores of first aid calls are initiated in the county because of alcohol abuse by a minor. Property damage, interpersonal violence, and other dangerous consequences are often related to the problem. It is important for partygoers to be aware of the hazards of alcohol consumption, and to take pains to care for those individuals who may have indulged excessively.

New Jersey's motor vehicle laws don't require impairment if a driver under 21 is suspected of having consumed alcohol. Any consumption at all can result in charges that will, if upheld, result in heavy fines and a loss of license for up to two months.

Adult and juvenile drivers alike are encouraged to use programs available in Somerset County such as the Hero Campaign, wherein local establishments offer complimentary soft drinks to a group's "designated driver." EmPoWER Somerset's "Ride Home 2Nite" initiative is another alternative to driving while under the influence; a list of potential local taxi services is available by simply searching the program's name on your smartphone.

Another concern for the Partnership continues to be the issue of distracted driving. This epidemic is not confined to the holiday season and has been addressed previously in the "Put It Down" campaign over the past two years. Drivers of all ages are reminded that no cellphone call or text message is important enough to take without a hands-free device while driving. Enforcement of the laws regarding distracted driving is being increased as this article is being written, with special attention being paid to the issue on predetermined days of each week.

EmPoWER Somerset and the Somerset County Chiefs wish everyone a happy and safe holiday season.

Pat Ussery
BEDMINSTER
POLICE CHIEF

Chief Ussery writes on behalf of the Somerset County Association of Chiefs of Police.

The Safe Communities Coalition of Somerset County works to foster a safe and healthy community by reducing drug use, underage drinking and prescription drug abuse. For more information, visit www.safecoalition.org.