

Sunday, Mar. 16, 2008

Caring about the issues that affect children and the entire community

By Bob Heisse

You don't have to read the paper very closely to know that alcohol abuse causes problems in this place we call Happy Valley. Every weekend, sometimes every day, and it doesn't have to be State Patty's Day.

This isn't a new concern but it's a growing concern, as drunken-driving rates continue on pace to break last year's record. A common misperception is to blame Penn State students for the problem, or most of it. There are 42,000 of them, to be sure, and they're coming back today for the rest of the spring semester.

But you only have to look at the drunken-driving trends to know that this is a countywide problem.

More than half of those arrested are not students, and of course the arrests only count those whom police caught.

Any officer will tell you that, and anyone in law enforcement will tell you how blood-alcohol levels of those arrested have been increasing.

With that backdrop, there are two chances in coming weeks to bring this problem front and center.

First, a session titled "Alcohol: Making the Difficult Decisions" will be held at the State College Municipal Building at 6 p.m. March 25.

The session is co-sponsored by the Public Issues Forum of Centre County and the Partnership: Campus and Community United Against Dangerous Drinking.

As with any Public Issues Forum event, the discussion will revolve around three approaches. In this case they are: strengthen and enforce the law; treat the public health epidemic; and educate for societal change.

Everyone is welcome, and you should e-mail promotinghealth@sa.psu.edu to register in advance.

Second, Centre County will join hundreds of communities nationwide in hosting a session titled "Underage Drinking Prevention: Town Hall Meeting" on April 1. There are two parts to this event, sponsored by Centre County Communities that Care serving Bald Eagle Area, Bellefonte,

Penns Valley and Philipsburg-Osceola school districts, and Care Partnership: Centre Region Communities that Care serving the State College Area School District.

The morning session is for professionals and it occurs from 9 to 11 a.m. at the State College Elks Country Club in Boalsburg. The event includes breakfast. Registrations can be made by calling 404-9511 or by contacting centrecountytc@yahoo.com. The town meeting is for everyone and it starts at 7 p.m. at the Central Pennsylvania Institute of Science and Technology in Pleasant Gap.

The organizations cite these statistics: Up to 5.4 percent of Centre County 11- and 12-year-olds and 43.7 percent of 17- and 18-year-olds report alcohol use in the past 30 days.

That should be enough to start the discussion on April 1 or any other day.

The two Communities that Care groups have been working for years in Centre County, and they now cover all five school districts with the addition of Philipsburg-Osceola announced just last week.

Ours is among 100 Pennsylvania communities with these groups, which aim to make life better by reducing high-risk behavior among children and teens.

Volunteers have been active, and you're about to learn more about their efforts locally. Look for the start of a series of columns written by Communities that Care representatives on Wednesday in our On Centre section.

Thanks to both groups for collaborating on this new addition to the Wednesday papers.

As always, please contact me with concerns you have about anything in the Centre Daily Times or online at www.centredaily.com.

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