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BORDER REGION COALITION SPREADS THE WORD ABOUT ALCOHOL USE AMONG TEENS DURING ALCOHOL AWARENESS MONTH

Drinking too much alcohol can lead to health problems and social issues in adults and the risks increase among youth. Many underage drinkers are at risk for increased sexual activity and assault, alcohol poisoning and health issues, and it is against the law. This April, during Alcohol Awareness Month, the Border Region Coalition (BRC) for a Drug Free Doña Ana County encourages you to take time to educate yourself and your loved ones about the dangers of alcohol abuse and underage drinking.

According to the 2009 Youth Risk and Resiliency Survey, administered in Doña Ana County in the fall of 2009 to 1,228 students from three different school districts and seven different high schools, 27.1 percent of respondents reported drinking their first alcoholic beverage before the age of 13 years, and 40.1 percent of teens reported drinking at least one alcoholic beverage in the last 30 days. In addition, 23 percent of respondents reported binge drinking, having five or more drinks (males) or four or more drinks (females) in a short period of time, in the last 30 days.

It is important to talk to youth about the dangers of alcohol, while giving clear rules about not consuming it. By talking to youth, and finding out what they already know about alcohol, alcohol abuse and how available alcohol is in their lives, you can better prepare to answer questions and teach your child how to say no. Listen carefully without interrupting. Not only will this approach help your child to feel heard and respected, but it can serve as a natural lead-in to discussing alcohol topics. Parents do make a difference. When you talk to your children they do listen.

During discussion, parents can also set appropriate guidelines and set good examples, in particular, by becoming a responsible host. In an effort to decrease the use of underage drinking, the BRC is asking all parents to help youth make the right choices concerning the use of alcohol by promoting the home as a “Responsible Host” house, a place where teens will not be exposed to substances. A Responsible Host Pledge can be downloaded at www.unifiedprevention.com.

It is best to talk to children early—by preschool age, most children have seen adults drink alcohol, and unless they have adequate communication from a trusted adult, they won’t understand the dangers of using alcohol and may actually think it is okay to drink at an early age. They should understand youth who choose to use alcohol are more likely to

have serious trouble in school, get hurt in a car accident, be a victim of crime and have a problem with addiction as an adult.

It is also important to teach youth that alcohol is a powerful drug that slows down the body and mind. It impairs coordination, slows reaction time and impairs vision, clear thinking and judgment; a 12-ounce can of beer, a 5-ounce glass of wine, and 1.5 ounces of hard liquor all contain the same amount of alcohol and have the same effects on the body and mind. On average, it takes two to three hours for a single drink to leave a person's system and nothing can speed up this process, including drinking coffee, taking a cold shower or walking it off. Youth should understand people tend to be very bad at judging how seriously alcohol has affected them, like thinking they can drive after drinking, when they actually cannot.

Watch for drinking problems in your teenager. According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, experts believe that a drinking problem is more likely if you notice several of the following signs at the same time, if they occur suddenly and if some of them are extreme in nature.

- Mood changes: flare-ups of temper, irritability, and defensiveness.
- School problems: poor attendance, low grades, and/or recent disciplinary action.
- Rebelling against family rules.
- Switching friends, along with a reluctance to have you get to know the new friends.
- A “nothing matters” attitude: sloppy appearance, a lack of involvement in former interests, and general low energy.
- Finding alcohol in your child's room or backpack, or smelling alcohol on his or her breath.
- Physical or mental problems: memory lapses, poor concentration, bloodshot eyes, lack of coordination, or slurred speech.

If you think your child may have a drug or alcohol problem, get help. Don't wait. Contact the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, National Drug Information Treatment and Referral Hotline at 800-662-HELP (4357) or visit www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov.

The Unified Prevention (UP!) Border Region Coalition works to make sure that every child in Doña Ana County has the opportunity to live a life free of drugs and alcohol. For more information on how you can donate or become a member of the coalition, contact the Community Foundation of Southern New Mexico at 575.521.4794 or coordinator@cfsnm.org.