

## Coalition reviews underage drinking

### Group says alcohol companies target youth with alcopops

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Durant — Underage drinking is one problem that has never seemed to disappear. At a town hall meeting Sunday afternoon, local residents were told about underage drinking and how alcohol companies target young people.

The meeting, sponsored by the Turning Point Coalition and the Durant Safe and Drug Free Community Committee, included a presentation titled “Alcopops: Not your Grandma’s Lemonade.”

Speakers included Delinda Knox, Drug Free Community coordinator, Greg Howse, Safe School director for public schools and vice chair of the Turning Point Coalition, and Shannon Hodges, prevention counselor for Durant schools.

According to Howse, the Turning Point Coalition supports “positive youth development.”

“We begin to help them understand what drinking alcohol does to the brain. Alcohol consumption in large quantities has a negative impact on the brain,” Howse said. “Your brain is not done developing at (age) 7 or 8.”

State Rep. John Carey was in attendance with his two daughters, and he opened the meeting with a comment to young people in attendance.

“Please keep up what you’re doing. I can’t imagine what they (my two girls) will face if you don’t keep up your part,” Carey said, in reference to the group’s efforts.

Next, Knox opened the meeting with some comments about underage drinking, then introduced Howse and Hodges. They discussed alcohol companies and how they target young people, specifically in making alcopops, which cover the taste of alcohol and appeal to those that don’t like the taste of alcohol.

According to Howse, alcopops are also called cheerleader beer and girly drinks.

“If I were to make an alcopop, I’d take a beer base, then take out the color, flavor and alcohol. What I have left is a malt-based product. Then I add flavoring, distilled spirits and sell it as alcohol,” Howse said.

He added that, in one survey, when given the choice between regular drinks, alcohol and alcopops, 78 percent of eighth graders surveyed said they preferred alcopops.

“Teens are three times as likely to drink as adults (if they start at a younger age),” Hodges said. “They (alcopops) were developed because young people don’t like the taste of beer. They taste like soda.”

Another speaker at the event was Durant High School sophomore Lesley McDaniel, who is a member of the Adventure Youth Council at the high school, a program that offers alternative places for teens to hang out, instead of parties or other places that have alcohol.

“Teens start by drinking soda, then they move on to energy drinks. When they get tired of that they go to alcohol,” said McDaniel, who explained that there is brand confusion because the packaging of alcoholic energy drinks is similar to nonalcoholic alternatives.

“Be aware of what’s out there. Be educated about energy drinks, about which contain alcohol and which ones don’t,” McDaniel said.

An additional problem leading to underage drinking is the cost of alcoholic energy drinks versus nonalcoholic ones. Howse said that alcoholic energy drinks cost less, so you get “more bang for your buck.”

Hodges also mentioned that some people mix caffeine, which is a stimulant, with alcohol, which is a depressant.

“It’s like getting in a car and stepping on the gas peddle and brake peddle at the same time,” Hodges said.

Also, Hodges mentioned that some stores don’t haven’t updated scanners and the store clerks don’t know to look for identification because the product does not scan across as alcoholic.

According to Howse, beer is taxed at \$0.40 per gallon and distilled spirits are taxed at \$5.56 per gallon. Approximately 2.55 million alcopops are sold in Oklahoma, which amounts in a lost revenue of \$13.16 million.

Howse said solutions to curbing underage drinking is to tax alcopops and alcoholic drinks as distilled spirits, not beer, and to limit access,

Also, more places could adopt a Social Hosting Ordinance law, which would hold party hosts responsible for anyone drinking underage. Plus, more compliance checks could be done.

Some of the public comments included that “our laws are not strong enough” and “(alcoholic) packaging should be labeled fairly.”

Knox closed the meeting by mentioning that Durant High School’s Prom is April 19, which is a “big night to take a first drink.”

However, Knox pointed out that “the majority of youth do not drink.”

“Think before you get drunk,” Knox said.

For more information about the Turning Point Coalition, call Howse at 920-4930, extension 210, or attend one of their meetings, held the second Thursday of every month at 10 a.m. at the Health Department.

For more information about the Durant Safe and Drug Free Community Committee, call Knox at 920-4930, extension 205.