

Underage drinking prevention discussed at Woods County Coalition's Town Hall Meeting

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Underage drinking is the use of alcohol by a person under the age of 21, the minimum legal drinking age. Underage drinking is against the law, yet it persists today, and is a serious problem deeply embedded in American culture. In order to change that, it will take repeated work over time in homes and schools, on campuses, and in policy arenas. Prevention of underage drinking must become a priority, as an ongoing project for parents, for teachers, and other concerned adults, that begins as early as 10 years of age and continues throughout adolescence.



Lana Shaffer, the Northwest Oklahoma Turning Point Consultant welcomes the Town Hall Meeting and Youth Listening Session participants to the evening's program, in which underage drinking issues took

On March 31, 2008, the Woods County Coalition, comprised of representatives from the Woods County Health Department, Share Medical Center, the Woods County OSU Extension Service, Alva Public Schools, NWOSU, and the Alva Recreational Complex sponsored a Town Hall Meeting and Youth Listening Session at the Alva Recreational Complex at 6:00 pm. Following an informal meal, Lana Shaffer, the NW Oklahoma Turning Point Consultant welcomed the audience of thirty-five people to the Town Hall meeting. Lana quoted from a recent health survey completed by Woods County residents in which 84% of the respondents said underage drinking is a major issue in Woods County. A recent success brought to the group's attention was the passing of a social host ordinance in Alva. This ordinance makes it illegal for any person hosting a party where alcohol is being served to minors as being against the law.

A youth panel, comprised of students from Alva High School and NWOSU, shared their views on the effects of drinking and smoking among their friends and families. One member of the panel suggested parents take a more active and concerned role with their adolescents, instead of apathetic attitudes currently being shown.

Terri Haynes, representing the Victim's Impact Panel of Oklahoma offered services to the group, in which formal presentations and demonstrations can be scheduled in middle schools and high schools throughout Oklahoma several times each year, in order to graphically see and hear the results of underage drinking and driving.

The audience then divided into discussion groups to address the issues presented and to offer solutions to the problems concerning underage drinking. Several recommendations were shared and were met with approval.

Those recommendations are: more education should be directed to parents and students, the Victim's Impact Panel should be requested yearly in our schools, where parents and students could view pictures and hear stories of the actual victims of drunk drivers. Compliance checks should be more frequent and harsher punishments should be invoked for those selling and those purchasing beer, alcohol, etc.

Another recommendation from the group stated again that harsher outcomes for suppliers of beer and alcohol should be enforced and more severe punishments should be given by the legal systems. It was recommended for parents of children who have been convicted of a DUI to attend a Victim's Impact Panel program to see and hear the effects of underage drinking and driving. Also, citizens should be encouraged to contact our state legislators to encourage a Social Host Law statewide. Another recommendation from the group requested school searches to be unpublished and random in order to get the best results.

The Town Hall Meeting and Youth Listening Session was successful as an opportunity to discuss the concerns Woods County citizens have for our youth as they are faced with making choices that may effect their entire lives. The Woods County Coalition has made addressing underage drinking and youth access to alcohol one of the coalition's top priorities. If you are interested in getting involved or learning more about this initiative, the coalition meets on the last Monday of the month at noon at the First Christian Church and invites anyone interested to attend. The next meeting will be May 19th (due to Memorial Weekend).