

Underage drinking problem in Woods County

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By Lynn L. Martin

A group comprised of private citizens, health department workers, a city council representative, hospital employees, nursing students and a religious leader met Monday noon in the basement of Alva's First Christian Church to seek solutions to the growing problem of under age drinking.

Prevention Specialist Sarah Thompson presented several shocking statistics such as many children have their first alcohol based drink at age nine or ten; that alcohol kills more kids than all the illegal drugs combined; and that the source of most alcohol for underage drinkers is from the parents' supply in the home or from older kids.

Sean Byrne, executive director of Prevention Workz, Inc., of Enid helps supply support to those cities and counties trying to fight the problem.

PARENTAL SOCIAL HOST PROBLEMS

Julia Bays mentioned there is a problem of parents buying the alcohol, hosting a party, while taking away the car keys from those under age students attending, and the parents thinking they did good.

Byrne strongly attacked such parent involvement. He said, "They may stop the kids from driving drunk that evening, but they are not protecting the kids from date rape or the brain damage which impacts learning."

He urged those in attendance to ask city government for an anti "Social Host" law similar to one recently passed in Edmond.

Statistics presented showed that kids who start drinking at age 14 are four times more likely to become dependent on alcohol than those who start at the legal age of 21.

Byrne said, "We have an environment in this country which offers alcohol on nearly every corner."

He illustrated the problem with the change in gasoline service stations. "Used to, you would stop for gas and a soda pop. Now, the gas stations have changed into convenience stores which sell hundreds of products, but especially alcohol.

"Our kids learn from the environment around them. What they see is that drinking is normal and is expected."

Another speaker was Lana Safer of the "Turning Point" program with the health department. Not only did she address the harm of alcohol upon the youth, but covered a broader issue of trying to improve the health of all citizens.

She mentioned construction of walking trails (construction is in progress now in Alva) and the removal of pop and sugar snacks from the public schools. A leaflet distributed showed the total health care cost in Woods County is \$35,652,670.57 for preventable health problems.

The number one issue in Woods County is heart disease, with an average of 53 deaths per year with an average cost of \$369,476.69 per death. Another major problem in Woods County is obesity which affects 14.1% of the population at a cost of \$482,690.00 per year.

Tobacco use by 32% of the residents adds to the health cost burden by an amount of \$9,183,900.00 per year.

There are about ten births to teen mothers per year in Woods County with a cost of \$32,000.00.

Those attending included: Sarah Thompson, prevention specialist, NW Behavioral Health; Larry Olmstead, Oklahoma Turning Point; Sarah Ward, child welfare supervisor, DHS; Karen Armbruster, Woods County Extension Office; Kylene Rehder, NWOSU social work instructor; Lynn Martin, Alva Review-Courier; Jerrie McKinley, president of Alva City Council substituting for the mayor; Julia Bays NW Domestic Crisis Center; Brock Robinson, NWOSU teacher and coach; Sean Byrne, Enid, Prevention Works, Inc.; Cheryl Ellis, Share Medical Center; Donna Bouziden, parent; Kristi Moorman, Share Medical Center; Melisa Evans, NWOSU nursing student; Sean Evans, pastor, First Christian Church; Lana Shaffer, Health Dept/Turning Point located in Harper County; Cheryl Peters, Health Education/Health Department; and Darlene Sander-son, administrative program officer, Woods, Major and Grant Health Dept.