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## **ALCOHOL AWARENESS MONTH FOCUSES ON ENDING UNDERAGE DRINKING**

While illicit drugs such as methamphetamine and ecstasy may garner much of the headline news, Oklahoma's most abused drug is actually alcohol.

To focus on the multiple problems alcohol creates in our families, the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services is promoting Alcohol Awareness Month in April. With a theme of "Recovery: It's a Family Affair," Alcohol Awareness Month is a national grassroots campaign to highlight that alcoholism is a treatable and preventable disease and that family members need help, too.

"In Oklahoma, more than 130,000 adults and 15,000 adolescents need treatment for alcohol abuse," said Ben Brown, deputy commissioner for substance abuse services at the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services. "The problem is so pervasive that Oklahomans needing treatment for alcohol abuse outnumber those needing treatment for drug abuse 7.5 to one."

Families need and want help, he added. Nationwide, more than 9 million children live with a parent dependent on alcohol and/or illicit drugs, and more than half of all adults have a family history of alcoholism or problem drinking.

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“Alcoholism affects not only the person who’s drinking, but also a wide circle of people close to the alcoholic – relatives, friends, neighbors, employers, co-workers and classmates,” Brown said. “Treatment must include the family as well as the individual. Families and friends often suffer many of the same consequences of alcoholism as the alcoholic, yet are often overlooked when it comes to recovery.”

Substance abuse is closely linked to many of our most difficult social problems, including crime, homelessness, teen pregnancy and domestic violence, Brown added. In Oklahoma, substance abuse is responsible for 85 percent of homicides, 80 percent of prison incarcerations, 75 percent of divorces, 65 percent of child abuse cases, 55 percent of domestic assaults, 50 percent of traffic fatalities, 35 percent of rapes and 33 percent of suicides.

Preventing lifelong alcohol addiction begins with efforts geared toward youth, he said.

A study by the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services found that 44 percent of Oklahoma high school students reported having one or more drinks of alcohol within the past 30 days. Also, 30 percent of Oklahoma high-school students reported “binge” drinking (having five or more drinks in a row, within a couple of hours).

“Alcohol is the leading cause of death and injury among teenagers and young adults. Alcohol-related traffic accidents kill an average of one teenager per hour nationally. Alcohol use also accounts for thousands of deaths each year from suicides, homicides, burns and drowning, and is directly correlated with juvenile delinquency, teenage pregnancy, high-school dropout rates, fetal alcohol syndrome, and the use of other drugs such as marijuana.

“We also know that children who begin drinking before age 15 are four times more likely

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### Alcohol Awareness Month/3

to become alcoholics as adults than those who begin at 21, the legal drinking age,” he said. “It’s important to recognize the dangers of underage drinking, and put a stop to it. Parents have the most influence over a teen’s decision to drink or not drink alcohol, but efforts also must be enforced at the local level to prohibit convenience stores, especially, from selling beer to minors.”

For written materials about alcoholism, call the department’s Prevention Resource Center at (405) 522-3810. Or, if you or a loved one suffers from alcoholism, call the Reach-Out hotline at 1-800-522-9054 for assistance in finding a substance abuse treatment program near you.

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