

CHI sets new 2011 goals

By Paul Martin

Youth who drink before age 15 are six times more likely to develop alcohol dependence than those who begin drinking at the age of 21. The median age at which children begin drinking in Goodhue County is around 12.5 years old.

Parents and students in Zumbrota schools learned these shocking facts recently, together with simple information on questions such as "How can you tell if a friend has a drinking problem?", and "What can you do to help (if they do)?" Youth handouts and personal messages from area residents, such as Officer Gene Leifeld, Chair of the Zumbrota Chemical Health Initiative Council, are now a familiar part of local events such as elementary school lyceums, parent/teacher conferences, and the Goodhue County Fair.

Five years of success has seen the Chemical Health Initiative (CHI) of Goodhue County become one of only 100 such groups nationwide to be granted five more years federal funding, as reported in the News-Record in November. With \$125,000 per year promised, 2011 sees CHI launching new programs. The goals remain the same: to eliminate underage drinking and illegal drug use, and to promote positive choices about chemical health for all Goodhue County families. The method involves changing behavior in the whole community. Support from parents and neighbors is vital and growing. Faith leaders, the police and others are all throwing their influence behind the cause. Forward plans will see local CHI councils, such as those in Zumbrota, Goodhue, and Kenyon/Wanamingo, working hard to support cities in passing new ordinances. The following are three important efforts for 2011.

Alcohol server training

The Chemical Health Initiative provides easily accessed online training for all sellers and servers of alcohol. Underage sales are a major focus of the training. The training is free and helps employees know the laws and how to enforce them. It is paid for out of the licensing fees of owners of bars and liquor stores, that also cover background checks. The program is a win-win for the business, as it helps protect them from legal problems, and often earns them discounts on their insurance policies. If a city requires the training, it just adds it to its regular enforcement.

Social host ordinances

Southern Minnesota parents hosted a party for teens. To keep those present safe, in case alcohol was brought into the home, they made them all give up their shoes. Even so, late in the night, a teen left in his socks, and was killed by a train while walking on the tracks. Parents and others who buy alcohol for partying teens are breaking the law, but currently face only civil lawsuits if others bring alcohol into their home. CHI is working with law enforcement across Goodhue County to pass laws that make it a misdemeanor for adults to allow any underage drinking on their property. The cities of Red Wing, Kenyon and Lake City have already passed such a law. Common sense suggests it and evidence confirms it: when access is made harder, drinking goes down. Other cities are looking at passing social host ordinances.

Not in my house

CHI wants parents to ask: What prescription drugs do I have in my house? Am I sure my children or grandchildren cannot take them? Abuse of prescription drugs by young people is a fast-growing concern. CHI reminds everyone to keep their prescription drugs in a safe, locked place, where they cannot harm someone. Under the new SAFE program, unwanted drugs can now be dropped off without question at law enforcement centers in Red Wing and Wanamingo. CHI is working to open other SAFE sites across the county.

According to federal rules, this 5-year grant is the final such award. CHI will be working hard to ensure that, by 2016, the whole community of Goodhue County will be a safer and healthier place for young people to develop good judgments concerning alcohol and dangerous drugs.