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The Ventura County edition of *Prevention File* is published in cooperation with the Ventura County Behavioral Health Department, Training, Applied Research, Alcohol and Drug Prevention and Community Mental Health Promotion Division. Please address all comments to Kathy Staples, manager of the Training, Applied Research, Alcohol and Drug Prevention and Community Mental Health Promotion Division, 300 N. Hillmont Ave., Ventura, CA 93003 or call 805/652-6096. E-mail: Kathleen.Staples@mail.co.ventura.ca.us

A BOLD NEW INITIATIVE TO REDUCE BINGE DRINKING

 VENTURA COUNTY IS EMBARKING ON A BOLD NEW COUNTYWIDE PLAN to reduce underage and binge drinking—a cloud over the lives of thousands of teen-agers and college students. The grassroots coalitions that have implemented effective alcohol prevention strategies at the local level will become the blueprint for a new community partnership embracing the entire county.

The plan, conceived by the Ventura County Behavioral Health Department, is a response to growing public concern over the impact of ready access to alcohol by young people and alarming rates of binge-level drinking in the 15 to 25 age group.

Traffic crashes involving alcohol and youthful drivers and incidents of violence and academic failure associated with heavy drinking by college students have turned the spotlight on this problem. A recent random digit dial telephone survey indicated that drunk driving and alcohol and drug use are the top concerns regarding teenagers among residents of Ventura County.

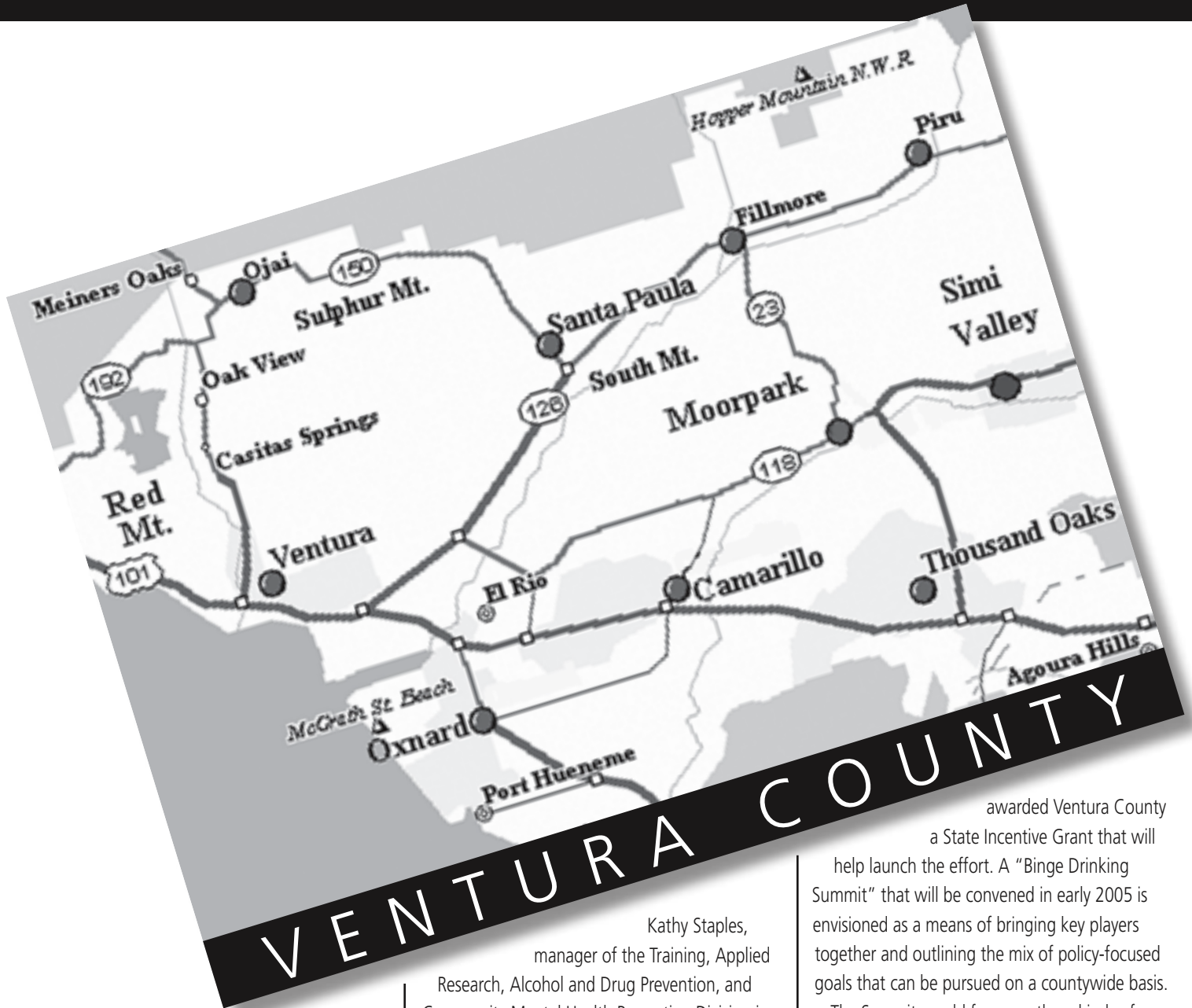
National surveys have charted the extent of alcohol use among young people—most recently a finding that almost 80 percent of adolescents have consumed alcohol by the time they are

high school seniors. This fact alone points to shortcomings nationwide in compliance with laws and tradition fixing 21 as the legal drinking age.

In Ventura County, findings from the California Healthy Kids Survey bear out the scope of the problem. Data from recent surveys in four school districts in the county showed that one out of five high schoolers had engaged in binge-level drinking (five or more drinks on an occasion for men, four or more for women) in the previous 30 days. Moreover, the rate of juvenile arrests for alcohol and drug offenses in Ventura County is significantly above the state average—12.8 arrests per 1,000 youths aged 10 to 17, compared to a state average of 9.1.

Such statistics are a starting point for an initial effort by the upcoming countywide community partnership to explore more fully the nature and extent of Ventura's underage and binge drinking problem. A data-collection program will shed more light on such questions as the number of youths and young adults involved in alcohol-related traffic crashes, the number of college students who report significant second-hand effects from use of alcohol by their peers, and information on how binge-drinking relates to arrests for driving under the influence. A survey conducted by the drinking driver program in Ventura County already has helped define problem areas by asking DUI offenders under 25 years of age some pertinent questions about the circumstances that led up to their arrests (see accompanying article).





VENTURA COUNTY

Kathy Staples, manager of the Training, Applied Research, Alcohol and Drug Prevention, and Community Mental Health Promotion Division in the County's Behavioral Health Department, said getting a clear understanding of the factors that contribute to alcohol problems among youth is the key to making changes for the better. "Since 1996 we've been building resources at the community level to address alcohol-related issues through policies that change the environment in which alcohol is sold and consumed," she says. "We've seen that change is possible when people work together in coalitions—concerned residents, parents, youths, public safety and government officials, and people from the business and the faith communities."

Community partnerships at the local level provide a blueprint for moving to the county as a whole as the arena for prevention activities. California's Alcohol and Drug Program has

awarded Ventura County a State Incentive Grant that will help launch the effort. A "Binge Drinking Summit" that will be convened in early 2005 is envisioned as a means of bringing key players together and outlining the mix of policy-focused goals that can be pursued on a countywide basis.

The Summit would focus on three kinds of environmental risk factors shown by research to affect rates of underage and binge drinking. One is the availability of alcohol—such as the number and density of alcohol outlets, low prices and drink specials, and house and beach parties where alcohol is available to underage guests. Another is the community laws and norms that tolerate binge drinking, such as advertising and promotion of alcoholic beverages and inadequate enforcement of laws regarding sale of alcohol to minors. Another is the tendency of many adults to look upon binge drinking as a harmless "rite of passage" for youth.

These risk factors are already familiar to those in Ventura County communities who have participated in prevention coalitions at the local level. Members of those coalitions are

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being asked now to raise their sights to achieve similar goals on a broader scale. A Community Partnership Advisory Committee will help chart a course for the new effort, drawing on expertise of regional and national prevention experts. Training and technical assistance will be provided to coalition groups.

Juvenile Judge Brian Back of the Ventura County Juvenile Court welcomes the prospect of a stepped-up countywide effort to reduce underage drinking. He says 19 out of 20 repeat offenders who come before him are involved with alcohol or other drugs. "Poverty and lack of education have to be cited, too, but alcohol and drug use is so prevalent that it can almost be considered the defining issue," he told *Prevention File*. The fact that the preponderance of his cases involves youths in the age range of 15 to 18 points to the extent that access to alcohol by teenagers is affecting society.

Back sees two major factors feeding the underage-drinking problem. One is the nature of alcohol advertising, with messages obviously aimed at young people and influencing their standards of behavior. The other is the attitude toward youthful drinking on the part of so many adults—even parents. "They simply don't take it seriously. They're willing to shrug it off."

Sgt. Al Moussa of the community policing unit in Thousand Oaks believes adults in that community—especially those directly involved in the sale and serving of alcoholic beverages—are developing a new appreciation for the importance of shielding young people from the effects of alcohol. Prevention efforts developed in Thousand Oaks in recent years are among those that would be used as a pattern for the county as a whole.

"Our bar task force is helping people make the connection between what happens in bars and what happens on the streets due to drinking and driving," he says. The task force of enforce-

ment people visit bars regularly to make sure employees are adhering to responsible beverage service practices. "We try to educate them on how to spot false IDs, and how to keep people from drinking so much they cause trouble in and around the bar or behind the wheel."

The new countywide community partnership will seek to develop a unified environmental prevention system in Ventura County. Besides the kind of enforcement strategies exemplified in the Thousand Oaks bar task force, the areas of concern will include policies for serving alcohol at public events and controlling alcohol outlet density. The partnership will seek to develop new ties between community agencies and the prevention specialists at colleges and universities in the county. It will seek media exposure to help raise public awareness of the impact of underage and binge drinking and what can be done to reduce it.

Prevention advocates have noted that news outlets often fail to note that alcohol was involved in tragic incidents. Two recent examples in Ventura County bear this out. In both the beating death of a homeless man in the City of Ventura in 2001, and the rape and murder of a young Santa Paula woman on New Year's Eve 2003, media coverage made few if any references to the fact that the perpetrators in both cases were under the legal drinking age and, according to witnesses, had been binge drinking prior to the crimes. □

Adolescent Drinking



DRINKING AND DRIVING BY YOUTHS REMAINS A SERIOUS PROBLEM.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, in the United States 24 percent of drivers between the ages of 15 and 20 years who were killed in traffic crashes in 2000 had blood alcohol concentra-

tion of 0.08—the legal limit in California—or more. Overall, 3,827 young drivers were killed in alcohol-related crashes in 2000. The highest intoxication rates in fatal car crashes were among drivers aged 21 to 24 (27 percent).

According to Joel Grube, PhD, director of the federally funded Prevention Research Center in Berkeley, CA, given these statistics, it is imperative to develop strategies to reduce adolescent drinking and the risks associated with it.

“Traditionally, alcohol prevention for adolescents has focused on school-based education. School-based programs, however, cannot provide a complete answer to the problem of drinking by young people. In part, this limitation

arises because young people are immersed in a broader social context in which alcohol is readily available and glamorized. Policy approaches to prevention have considerable promise for addressing the problems associated with adolescent drinking by changing this social environment. In particular, policy strategies can be used to reduce alcohol availability, deter drinking by increasing the personal costs associated with it, and communicate norms to young people about

the unacceptability of their drinking and to adults about the unacceptability of providing alcohol to them,” said Grube and Peter Nygaard, PhD, a research scientist at PRC, in a paper presented at a meeting of the International Council on Alcohol, Drugs and Traffic Safety held in Glasgow, Scotland in August.

Grube and Nygaard say that while policy can be broadly defined, in this context alcohol policy refers to formal legal and regulatory mechanisms, rules, and procedures for reducing the consumption of alcohol or risky drinking behaviors and enforcement of these measures.

According to the researchers, based on the available evidence, the most effective policies appear to be the following:

Minimum Drinking Age. Studies indicate that raising the minimum legal drinking age from 18 to 21 years in the United States reduced single vehicle nighttime crashes involving young drivers by 11 percent to 16 percent at all levels of crash severity. A recent review of 241 studies on MLDA concludes that higher minimum drinking ages are significantly related to lower rates of DUI, traffic crashes, and other mortality and morbidity. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the MLDA of 21 has saved an estimated 21,877 lives between 1975 and 2002 through reducing traffic fatalities in the United States.

Taxation/Price. Many studies have focused on the impact of taxation and price on adolescent alcohol consumption and related problems. One study has estimated that a 100 percent increase in the real beer tax in the United States would reduce highway mortality by 27 percent among 18 to 20-year-old drivers. It has also been esti-



Drivers: What is to be Done?

Studies indicate that raising the minimum legal drinking age from 18 to 21 years in the United States reduced single vehicle nighttime crashes involving young drivers by 11 percent to 16 percent at all levels of crash severity.

estimated that a 15 percent decline in traffic fatalities among this age group would result from simply increasing the excise tax on alcohol at the rate of inflation. Overall, increasing taxation to keep pace with inflation would lead to a 19 percent reduction in heavy drinking by youths and a 6 percent reduction in high risk drinking by youths. However, some recent research that takes into account potentially confounding differences among states in the United States has found no evidence for the effects of taxation and price on alcohol consumption and alcohol-related traffic fatalities, either among youth or in the general population.

“Although taxation and price may be effective prevention strategies, it is important to keep in mind that price elasticities are not attributes of commodities and that the effects of price increases may be moderated by other social, environmental and economic, factors. Thus, the price sensitivity of alcohol may vary considerably across time, states, and countries depending on drinking patterns and attitudes and on the presence of other alcohol policies,” said Grube and Nygaard.

Zero Tolerance. Zero tolerance laws apply a lower legal BAC to underage drivers. Generally, these limits are set at the lowest level that can be detected reliably. Overall, these laws have been found to be very effective in reducing underage drinking and driving and related car crashes. For example, a recent study in the United States found a 24 percent decline in alcohol-related fatal crashes involving young drivers as a result of instituting lower blood alcohol levels for young people. Other recent studies have provided additional evidence for the effec-

tiveness of zero tolerance laws. For example, a 19 percent reduction in self-reported driving after any drinking and a 24 percent reduction in driving after five or more drinks was found using the federally funded Monitoring the Future survey data from 30 states.

Graduated Driver Licensing. Graduated driver licensing (GDL) laws restriction the circumstances under which young or novice drivers are allowed to drive, such as prohibiting driving during certain hours or driving with other young people in the vehicle. Some GDL laws contain zero tolerance provisions. Studies of GDL laws routinely show that they are associated with reductions in car crashes among young drivers, self-reported drinking and driving, and alcohol-related crashes. Other evidence, however, suggests that GDL requirements may have limited effects on alcohol use and alcohol-related crashes, above and beyond that of zero tolerance provisions within them.

“Nonetheless, GDL is useful on its own terms apart from its effects on drinking and driving and may be an important adjunct to zero tolerance laws, for example, providing cause for stopping young drivers who may be drinking,” say Grube and Nygaard.

Other prevention measures that have some research supporting their effectiveness are responsible beverage service programs—particularly those that are mandated or motivated by reduction of liability—and alcohol license restrictions, such as limits on outlet density and hours of sale. However, according to Grube and Nygaard, most policies cannot be effective in reducing drinking and driving among youths unless accompanied by enforcement and an awareness on the part of youths of the policy and enforcement efforts. □

LEARNING MORE ABOUT YOUNG DRINKING DRIVERS

FULLY ONE-THIRD OF YOUNG ADULTS ARRESTED FOR DRIVING UNDER THE INFLUENCE IN VENTURA COUNTY

have engaged in binge drinking on the day of their arrest. Binge drinkers usually drive more miles on streets and highways while intoxicated than more moderate drinkers do. And almost half of DUI offenders from 18 to 25 years of age had



their last drink in a private home rather than in a bar, club or restaurant.

These are some of the conclusions drawn from a "Place of Last Drink" survey of drinking drivers conducted by the Ventura County Behavioral Health Department Drinking Driving Program. The information gleaned from 3,236 persons convicted of a DUI offense in the county in 2002 and 2003 was analyzed by the Social Science Research Center at Cal State Fullerton. Its report will help the new countywide Community Partnership develop strategies to reduce underage and binge drinking.

Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death and disability for Americans between the ages of 18 and 25, and alcohol impairment is involved in a growing proportion of those crashes, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. In the Ventura County survey,

offenders in the 18-25 age range attending a court-mandated Drinking Driver Program were asked a series of questions about their arrest and the circumstances leading up to it.

Gregory Robinson, PhD, director of the Cal Fullerton research center, pointed out that participation in the survey was voluntary, and between 70 and 80 percent of those eligible agreed to

provide information. "While these data are highly indicative, the demographic attributes of 'decliners' are not known, and until these distinctions—if any—are understood, we cannot confidently assert that these results can be generalized to the entire population of young DUI offenders."

Still, the survey provides a valuable snapshot of the drinking-driving problem involving teenagers and young adults in Ventura County. And, it will provide a baseline for measuring the effectiveness of prevention strategies aimed at this age group in the years ahead.

Here are some of the key findings in the Place of Last Drink survey:

- Among drinking-drivers in the 18 to 25 age range, 21.3 percent were under the legal drinking age of 21.
- Almost two-thirds of drinking-drivers in the 18 to 25 age range were binge drinking (five or more drinks for men, four or more for women) on the day of their arrest. The largest proportion (22.7 percent) had drunk 11 or more drinks before their arrest.
- Nearly one in five young adult arrestees were

involved in an accident or caused injuries.

- Almost half reported drinking at a private residence immediately before their arrest. Underage drinkers (age 18-20) were much more likely to have consumed their last drink at a private home (100 percent of 18 year olds, 90 percent of 19 year olds, and 72.5 percent of 20 year olds).
- Just under 30 percent had their last drink at a licensed establishment, and eight of the top twelve locations they cited as their place of last drink are licensed as restaurants, not as bars or clubs.

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- Males aged 18 to 25 who identify themselves as White or Caucasian are disproportionately represented among binge-drinking DUI offenders. While they constitute 39.4 percent of the general White or Caucasian population in Ventura County, they comprised 51.8 percent of the arrestees. Latinos in the 18 to 25 age range represent 51.1 percent of the county's Latino population. However, they made up only 42.9 percent of the DUI group.
- Higher education appears to be a risk factor for driving after binge drinking. Three-fourths of young binge-drinking drivers were enrolled in a college or university at the time of their arrest. Only two-thirds of those not enrolled in a college or university had been binge drinking.
- Not surprising, the most common time for arrest of young drinking drivers is between 1 and 4 a.m. on weekends. Seven out of ten of their arrests occurred in the wee small hours of Friday, Saturday and Sunday. □

Playing It Safe in Ojai

The SAFE Coalition, led by local school officials, police, government representatives, parents, and youths, has kept the community focused on the problems and spurred a number of different responses to address them.

MENTION THE OJAI VALLEY AND THE WORDS THAT COME TO MIND MAY INCLUDE "IDYLIC," "PEACEFUL," OR EVEN "SHANGRI-LA." Certainly not "drug abuse" or "death by overdose."

However, when a popular local teenager regarded as a good kid died from an overdose of OxyContin in the winter of 2002, this wonderfully scenic community received an unexpected wake-up call. The community learned that there had been not just one overdose death, but a series of them, and that the police were receiving an average of five overdose calls a month. Furthermore, there had been repeated problems with teen drinking parties and drug-related offenses involving young people.

Prescription painkillers, methamphetamines, marijuana and alcohol were among the problems.

A series of articles in the local newspaper prompted a town meeting that drew law enforcement, government officials and 250 concerned community members. One speaker at the meeting, a local psychologist, warned: "We've had our wake-up call. Now, let's not hit the snooze button."

The community has done anything but snooze over the problems ever since, thanks in large part to the formation of the Coalition for a Substance Abuse-Free Environment (SAFE) for Ojai Valley youths. The SAFE Coalition, led by local school officials, police, government representa-

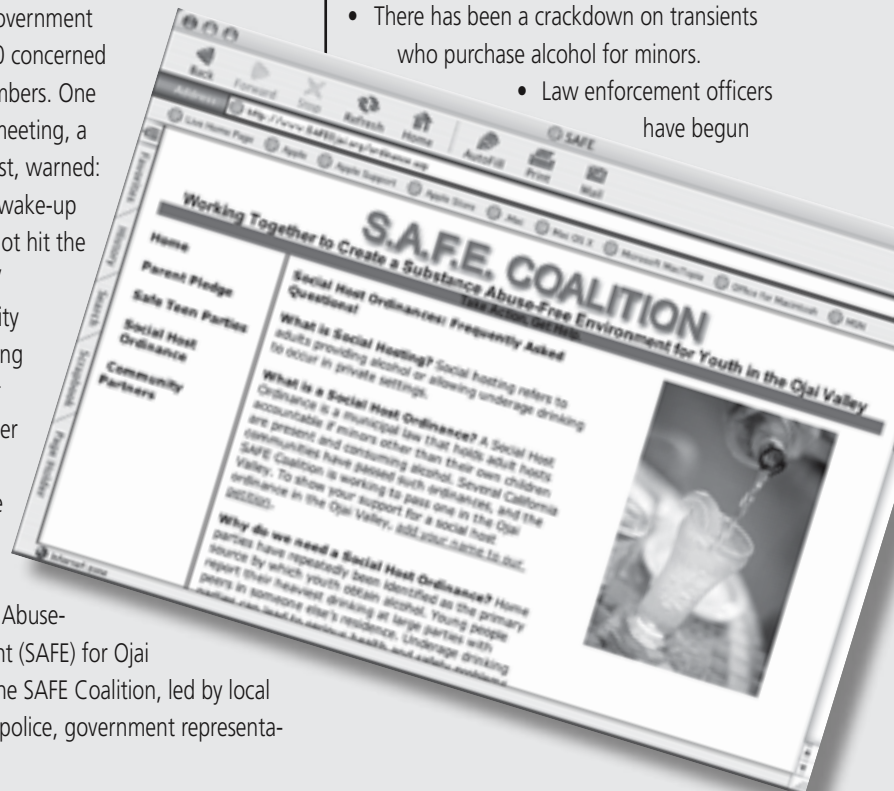
tives, parents, and youths, has kept the community focused on the problems and spurred a number of different responses to address them.

"There was a time in Ojai when people didn't want to acknowledge a substance abuse problem; we were in denial," said Rae Hanstad, an Ojai City Council member and the mother of three teenagers. "Now we've come out of denial, and we've got a wonderful group effort going—actually an astonishing group effort in terms of how everyone is working together."

The SAFE Coalition received a \$10,000 planning grant from the Ventura County Behavioral Health Department in December 2003 and another larger implementation grant in July 2004.

Ruth Cooper, who heads the SAFE Coalition, said the group has been busy planning and building relationships, but that they have already seen "early successes." Among them are the following:

- There has been a crackdown on transients who purchase alcohol for minors.
- Law enforcement officers have begun



including youth "party spots," such as parks and open space areas, on their regular beat runs.

- When officers catch youths who are in possession of alcohol or are under the influence of alcohol or drugs, parents are always called. If caught during school hours, school officials are notified as well.
- Law enforcement has begun working together with the private schools in the Ojai Valley as well as the public schools.
- The SAFE Coalition has joined forces with the WeTip Anonymous crime hotline, opening it to all residents of the Ojai Valley. Residents are being encouraged to call the hotline to report information about drug dealing and illegal drug use in the area. There are rewards for tips that result in conviction.
- The Ojai Unified School District has adopted a new drug and alcohol policy for students.

"We live in a nice place and we have good kids, so we may have been lulled into thinking that our youths were not affected by substance abuse," said Dr. Tim Baird, superintendent of the Ojai Unified School District. "The reality is that our schools are challenged by the same things as schools everywhere."

That reality became especially clear when the SAFE Coalition used their funding to survey Ojai middle and high school students in April 2004. A total of 88 students responded to the survey, which asked about the places, times and circumstances of alcohol and other drug use among local youths.

The survey showed that the students were aware that their peers drank and used drugs not only at home and at parties, but also at school events and—a small percentage—used during the school day.

"Most of the use occurs outside of the school day, but that doesn't mean we can ignore what's happening at school," Baird said.

The district's new drug and alcohol policy also has more teeth, and the campus resource officer

now wields more power. Students caught under the influence or in possession of drugs or alcohol now face the following consequences:

First Offense:

- Five day suspension that may be served off campus or in-house as determined by the site administrator
- Mandatory intervention counseling
- Banned from all school co-curricular activities for six weeks
- Enrollment in mandatory drug testing program for one year
- Enforcement of athletic code, fine arts code, and any other co-curricular contracts
- (High school only) – Loss of lunch pass for one year. If the student is a freshman or sophomore then they will not be eligible for a lunch pass during their junior year.

Second Offense:

- Five-day suspension that may be served off campus or in-house as determined by the site administrator
- Removal from school
- Recommendation for expulsion

For a third offense of selling or furnishing alcohol, illegal drugs, or prescription medications to other students the policy calls for mandatory expulsion from district

While the schools have developed stronger prevention and enforcement strategies, Ojai Valley parents have been asked to do their part in changing the social environment as well. The SAFE Coalition has asked parents to sign a "Safe Homes Parent Pledge," which asks parents to, "cooperate with each other and the community to create a healthy atmosphere in which the use of alcohol and other drugs is not the 'norm.'"

Parents who sign the pledge agree to communicate with each other about their children's activities and to report minors under the influence to their parents. Parents also pledge not to host youth parties at which alcohol and drugs are available.

Cooper said that teen home parties have become a major problem, either because parents are oblivious to the alcohol or drug use or because parents don't realize what they are getting into when they agree to have a party.

Hosting such a party is illegal, but it is difficult to prosecute, Cooper said. Because of that, the SAFE Coalition has begun discussing the benefits of a "social host ordinance," a municipal law that holds adult hosts accountable if minors other than their own children are present in a private setting and consuming alcohol. Several California communities have passed such ordinances and the SAFE Coalition is working to pass one in the Ojai Valley.

Ojai Police Chief Gary Pentis said he has been inspired by the SAFE Coalition's success at bringing different sectors of the community together to work toward a common goal.

"There's been an excellent connection between school administrators and law enforcement," he said. "And we've had better connectivity with parents."

Pentis said that dealing with youth alcohol and other drug use has been one of his primary concerns since taking his current job four years ago.

"The troubling thing for us is that we see alcohol and other drugs at the center of so many crimes we deal with," Pentis said. "Whether it is burglary, domestic violence or identity theft, drug offenses are at the center."

Four years ago, Pentis said alcohol and other drug use among youths was not a topic he could easily bring up in the community. "People are willing to talk about it now. That's a big step."

