

Underage drinking a problem for Douglas, all of Wyoming

Underage drinking is more widespread in the Cowboy State than previously known – at least according to the findings of a pilot program that involved the Douglas Police Department.

Data collected by communities participating in the initiative to reduce underage drinking confirm what law enforcement has long suspected, Douglas Police Chief Lori Emmert said.

The Wyoming Communities in Action (WY-CIA) initiative tracks youth-related alcohol offense in detail. State-wide, 80 percent of underage people charged with

being in possession of alcohol are cited and released, instead of arrested. Initiative managers also found that people age 18 to 20 accounted for 64 percent of the total arrests and citations. Teens aged 15-17 accounted for 26 percent of the total.

“The numbers reinforce what we have long suspected, that underage drinking is a serious problem in Douglas,” Emmert said. “Through WY-CIA, we hope we can implement strategies to cut down on underage

drinking and the problems that go with it.”

WY-CIA was launched last fall by the Wyoming Association of Sheriffs and Chiefs of Police to allow a case-study examination of different communities’ efforts to develop, implement and track strategies to cut down on underage drinking and alcohol-related problems. WY-CIA also provides funding to help reach those goals. Each city’s police

department received \$10,000 to start individualized efforts as pilot communities. Those five cities are receiving an additional \$10,000 now to continue their work.

The figures and statistics, along with information-sharing and case studies among the five pilot communities, indicate a serious threat to public health and safety as well as a clear need to shift the focus of law enforcement, policy makers and community leaders from treating the symptoms of alcohol abuse to prevention, Emmert said.

Alcohol abuse and drunk driving are serious problems, yet often lead to even more trouble. They increase crime rates in nearly

every category, such as burglaries and domestic violence, and are detrimental to the health and safety of the general public, she said. Alcohol abuse also devastates families and communities, stressing the resources of law enforcement, social service agencies, education institutions and the judicial system.

Emmert said that as a pilot community, the Douglas department is enforcing a zero-tolerance policy on driving under the influence and underage drinking. Officers are receiving special training in investigating where underage drinkers get alcohol, and officers are teaming up with Converse County Sheriff’s Office deputies for “party patrols.”

The police department is also increasing compliance checks at establishments that sell alcohol and is making more frequent checks at bars for underage drinkers.

Douglas was one of five communities selected based on population, geography and commitment from police chiefs to pilot the 16-month case-study project. The other participating communities are Casper, Rock Springs, Gillette and Powell.

Meanwhile, five new communities – Torrington, Rawlins, Lander, Riverton and Fremont County – will launch WY-CIA in May. The original five communities can serve as mentors while their successful projects become templates for real results, she explained.

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DPD Chief Lori Emmert