

Towns try new way to cut teen drinking

Cops to forgo arrest to give 2nd chance

By Sara Olkon and James Kimberly
Tribune staff reporters

February 14, 2007

Two days after four teenagers were killed in an Oswego crash in which the driver has been charged with DUI, three police chiefs from the western suburbs announced a program aimed at preventing alcohol abuse by teens.

The chiefs from the Hinsdale, Oak Brook and Clarendon Hills Police Departments had planned their initiative, made public Tuesday, before the crash Sunday morning in far western Kendall County. The car was carrying eight teens and the 23-year-old driver from a party in Montgomery where alcohol was served, police have said.

Police are investigating the source of the alcohol. The driver of the car has been charged with reckless homicide and aggravated driving under the influence of alcohol.

On Tuesday, the chiefs talked about expanding a program introduced in Hinsdale in 2004. Called Operation STAAT (Stop Teen Alcohol Abuse Together), it aims to get to the root of underage drinking early.

"We are trying to address both the drinking and the accidents," Oak Brook Police Chief Thomas Sheahan said.

Neighbors who suspect a teen party can anonymously call a hot line and are encouraged to record license plates of vehicles parked in the vicinity. The program also calls for community service for offenders.

The teenagers involved in Sunday's crash attended Oswego High School and ranged in age from 14 to 17.

The police chiefs said part of their goal is to better understand the increased abuse of alcohol among middle school kids.

"We have to get a handle on it," said Hinsdale Police Chief Brad Bloom. "I don't know what the reason is. But it's our kids. It's our kids in our community."

STAAT offers help for parents who suspect their teenagers have been drinking. Police officers will be dispatched to a home to administer a preliminary breath test. If the teenager fails, a juvenile officer will meet with the youth and set up community service hours. If parents say the teenager continues to drink, he or she can be charged with underage drinking.

If the teen stops drinking, he or she will not be arrested and not have a record and the school will not be notified of an athletic code violation.

Parents who find suspected drugs can bring them in for testing and confiscation. But the officers will not ask for identification or try to identify where the drugs came from.

"We can't arrest ourselves out of the situation," said Clarendon Hills Police Chief Patrick Anderson.

Darien officials are expected to join the effort. The four communities are part of Hinsdale Township High School District 86.

Officials have planned a town meeting at 7 p.m. Feb. 28 in Hinsdale Middle School.

District 86 Superintendent Nicholas Wahl, whose district has about 4,500 students at Hinsdale Central High School and Hinsdale South High School, said he thinks it's important that officials create an atmosphere of partnership and trust.

"DuPage County has avoided the Oswego tragedies--let's get in the awareness now," he said, "Let's let our parents know there is a resource."

In the Oswego crash, the Kendall County coroner Tuesday released the autopsy results for the four who died but could not say whether there was alcohol or drugs in their systems. Toxicology results will take several weeks, the coroner's office said.

The four who died were not wearing seat belts and at least two of them were seated on the laps of other passengers, according to the coroner.

The bodies of Katherine Merkel, 14, Jessica Nutoni, 15, Tiffany Urso, 16, and Matthew Frank, 17, were autopsied Monday night, said Deputy Coroner Jacquie Marcellis.

The Infiniti sedan in which they were riding early Sunday left Illinois Highway 31 near Oswego and slammed sideways into a utility pole. The driver, Sandra Vasquez, 23, of Aurora, was injured along with Arielle Rexford, 16, Robert Larson, 15, Joshua Dillon, 16, and James McGee, 16.

Merkel was on Frank's lap in the front passenger seat of the car, Marcellis said. Urso was found lying across passengers in the back seat. Nutoni was in the back seat, but authorities could not tell where she was seated, Marcellis said.

All the teens died from injuries sustained from slamming into the car's interior and other bodies, Marcellis said.

Police pledge to curb teen alcohol abuse

By Marni Pyke
Daily Herald Staff Writer

Posted Wednesday, February 14, 2007

It's been more than 30 years, but Oak Brook police Chief Tom Sheahan still remembers the first fatal drunken driving case he investigated.

It happened in Deerfield in 1975. A young man in a car struck and killed a girl on a bicycle.

"Two families were ruined," Sheahan said. "It stays with you the rest of your life."

Times have changed but the dangerous phenomenon of underage drinking is unrelenting, said Sheahan and two other DuPage County chiefs who want to reverse the trend.

Police from Oak Brook, Hinsdale and Clarendon Hills announced Tuesday a beefed-up effort to stop teenage alcohol abuse, which will include breath tests given in homes.

The action follows a Sunday accident that killed four Oswego High School students and sent four others to hospitals after a house party near Montgomery. Sandra Vasquez, the 23-year-old driver, was charged with reckless homicide and aggravated driving under the influence of alcohol.

The timing is coincidental but the tragedy underscores the need for prevention and parental involvement, police say.

"We want to let parents know they're not in this alone. We're not their adversaries," Sheahan said.

The three departments, along with Hinsdale High School District 86, Butler District 53 and Hinsdale Elementary District 181, will sponsor a town meeting Feb. 28 to explain their initiative and hear from the community.

The Stop Teenage Alcohol Abuse Together meeting will be at 7 p.m. at Hinsdale Middle School, 100 S. Garfield.

One disturbing trend police have noticed is children in their early teens drinking.

The reason? "Peer pressure is still the main issue," Hinsdale Deputy Chief Mark Mandarino said.

As a counter-offensive, authorities are continuing their anti-drinking program that includes a hotline to report suspicious parties and notifying parents if their car is in a neighborhood where a teenage drinking binge is going on.

One new component involves sending a police officer to a home where parents suspect their child has been drinking to conduct a breath test. If the test is positive, the child would be assigned to a juvenile officer and required to complete community service. No charges would be filed if the child completes the program.

People think police "just walk in, make an arrest and walk out. We want to stop the behavior before it starts," Sheahan said.

Vasquez was listed in fair condition Tuesday at Rush-Copley Medical Center in Aurora. She remains under police guard.

Officials say the Aurora resident was driving drunk and over the speed limit when her car carrying eight teenagers crashed into a utility pole around 2:30 a.m. Sunday near Route 31 and River Run Boulevard.

Police said they still are investigating the party held in the first block of Woodcliff Road and how underage teens got hold of alcohol.

Vasquez, who was at the party, has a valid driver's license and no previous alcohol-related offenses. Relatives and friends of the students said they became stranded at the house and needed a ride home.