

DuPage parents, police join forces to curb teen drinking

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Posted Thursday, March 01, 2007

Curbing teen drinking and the tragedies that ensue from alcohol abuse will take a united effort, a group of DuPage County parents, police and educators agreed at a community meeting in Hinsdale.

The event Wednesday evening, sponsored by the Oak Brook, Hinsdale and Clarendon Hills police departments and local school districts, was planned months ago. The timing, however, was prescient in the wake of a Feb. 11 crash in Oswego that killed five teenagers following a party.

The driver of the car, 23-year-old Sandra Vasquez of Aurora, is charged with reckless homicide and aggravated driving under the influence of alcohol.

"Every Monday morning there's a story in the news we don't want to see happen in our community," Oak Brook Police Chief Tom Sheahan said.

"We need to prevent what happened in Oswego from happening in our community," Hinsdale Police Chief Brad Bloom said.

Police and educators want to enhance earlier efforts to curb adolescent drinking that included the formation of the Stop Teen Alcohol Abuse Together program in 2004.

Currently, police sponsor a hotline where people can report suspicious parties.

New initiatives include breath tests conducted at homes by an officer when parents suspect their child has been drinking. If the test is positive, police work with the family, assigning the child to a juvenile officer and requiring him or her to perform community service. If the teen fulfills all requirements, no charges would be filed, however, if the child doesn't comply they'd be charged with a violation.

Another component would let parents bring substances they suspect are illegal drugs to police for testing without legal ramifications.

More than 200 people attended the meeting. Some parents wanted assurances their children wouldn't get in trouble if they reached out to authorities.

"Our officers will be instructed to be there as resources," Bloom said. But he added that flagrant lawbreaking could lead to arrests.

A number of parents offered personal stories of teen drinking problems, including Debbie Walsh, the mother of a 16-year-old Hinsdale High School District 86 honors student who was hospitalized after a binge-drinking episode during homecoming.

"It's great for everyone to come together," she said. "If we all work together we can come up with a plan. Our children have a bright future."

Hinsdale Central High School senior Lucy Ramirez advised the adults in the crowd to offer alternatives to drinking.

"I think one reason students drink is that they feel they don't have anything to do in the community," she said.