

Underage drinking in Fort Mill Township gets attention from sheriff's office, Keystone

By Christopher Corrado

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Underage drinking is becoming a serious problem in Fort Mill, according to law enforcement officials and an agency working to curb the behavior.

Between Jan. 1 and Sept. 20, there were 368 minor in possession charges made in York County and 219 were in Fort Mill Township, according to the York County Sheriff's Office. This means 59 percent of underage drinking occurs locally.

"Kids are drinking harder alcohol, more [frequently] and faster than ever," said Jane Alleva, community relations director at Keystone Substance Abuse Services in Rock Hill. "The Fort Mill/Tega Cay area is more vulnerable than other communities."

Demographics is the key reason on why, she said. Alcohol availability and abuse is connected to middle and upper-income families because they tend to have more money to buy it. Fort Mill and Tega Cay rank high in the county in median income.

"Opportunity is another reason why underage drinking is common in this area," Alleva said. "Parents are working in Charlotte and they do not get home until 7 p.m."

Alleva, who has been the director with Keystone for about three years, said one theory for the rise in underage drinking is the marketing of alcohol. Teens are being targeted with some of these alcoholic beverages.

"Energy [and] alcohol drinks are aimed at the boys, and pink, pretty bottles are aimed at girls," Alleva said.

Increased use of alcohol among teens is blamed for rising numbers of incidents of vandalism and violence, including fist fights and sexual assaults. Also, more girls are drinking than in the past, Alleva said.

She said parents are often naive about teen drinking and when they are aware, don't take it seriously enough. "At least it's not coke or meth," is what too many parents think, according Alleva .

Boredom, peer pressure and low self-esteem are the main reasons why teens are drinking, and vodka is their top choice, she explained.

"Vodka is number one in the area. It is clear, easy to sell in water bottles and it goes down smooth. The kids want to belong and, since some feel stupid and ugly, they want to numb the pain," Alleva said.

Keystone works hand-in-hand with the police in the area because they too have seen the rise in underage drinking.

Concerned parents may be in the dark on what they can do to prevent their children from drinking. Local law enforcement, educators at Fort Mill and Nation Ford high schools and Keystone are more than willing to help.

"Parents need to constantly monitor what their teenagers are doing and who they are hanging out with," said Lt. Pat Kiefer of the York County Sheriff's Office.

FMHS Principal Dee Christopher said he has not seen much underage drinking at the school, but there have been some incidents in which students showed up intoxicated

at after school events. A number of school-based programs are used to steer students away from alcohol and other drugs.

"National Red Ribbon Week, High School 101 and Alive at 25 are ran at school to prevent underage drinking," Christopher said. "National Red Ribbon Week, which is this week and around prom, provides statistics on accidents, injuries and casualties because of underage drinking. Project Care, a club, takes care of this."

Middle School Principals Tom Johnston of Gold Hill Middle School and Greg Norton of Fort Mill Middle School said they have not had any problems with alcohol lately. Johnston said in 2005, his first year as principal, some boys did bring a bottle to school.

"We have a drug dog that sniffs the kids' school bags, but we have not had any problems," Johnston said.

Norton said the penalties of underage drinking in his school are suspension, drug intervention and possible expulsion.

Alleva said parents, unintentionally, are a source of underage drinking. Since many parents are not paying attention, the liquor cabinet is up for grabs. When they do realize there's a problem, they can turn to Keystone for help.

"We have a program called Stepping Stones to help adolescents and youths who are addicted," Alleva said. "It's a very intense program where we work with 'how did you get here?'"

Keystone can be reached at 324-4118.