



Success Stories

Enforcing the Underage Drinking Laws Program

NEWS FROM THE FIELD

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Comprehensive Enforcement and Alcohol Measures Address Underage and Hazardous Drinking in College Town

Between 1987 and 2001, 15 college-aged students died in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania from alcohol-related causes such as acute alcohol poisoning and accidental injuries. Most victims had blood alcohol concentration (BAC) levels higher than .20. Moreover, a majority of the crime and public disorder to which police responded in Bloomsburg involved alcohol use.

The Town of Bloomsburg, population 12,365, is home to Bloomsburg University. Approximately 8,000 students arrive in the town each fall for resumption of classes. After their arrival, 66 percent of calls for service were university related according to police. The cause of the majority of calls was hazardous and/or underage drinking.

In 2001 and under the leadership of Chief Leo Sokoloski and Patrolman Leonard Rogutski, the Bloomsburg Police Department created a comprehensive alcohol enforcement plan to end alcohol-related crime, disorder, and death. After receiving comprehensive alcohol enforcement training, police began active enforcement of all alcohol laws, including law prohibiting public drunkenness, selling or furnishing to minors, and driving under the influence.

The police department also implemented a zero tolerance policy for alcohol-related offenses that prohibits plea-bargaining for alcohol-related offenses. Prosecutors also supported the agency's decision not to plea-bargain alcohol-related offenses such as DUI to lesser offense.

To address the many off-campus parties and alcohol-related crime, the municipal government developed or revised ordinances, as follows:

- An Open Container Ordinance was expanded to include private property because most large gatherings occurred on private property.
- An Excessive Noise and Disruptive Conduct Ordinance targets large late-night parties. Violators jeopardize their ability to rent or lease after repeated violations.
- A Disorderly Gathering Ordinance enables the town government to recover costs associated with

responding to numerous calls for service to the same address.

- A Large Outdoor Social Gatherings Ordinance sets a limit on attendance and requires party hosts to obtain a permit to serve alcohol. To obtain the permit, a security plan must be submitted and approved in advance by police.
- A Liquor License Transfer ordinance now requires a hearing before the Town Council and a Council vote to approve or deny the request.
- The Town's Code Enforcement established ordinances requiring hardwired and interconnected smoke detectors in off-campus student housing. Eight students perished in off-campus housing fires before 2001.
- Code enforcement officials required off-campus student housing to be inspected on a regular basis. Local courts worked together with code enforcement to set fines for disconnecting smoke alarms at a minimum of \$1,000.

The police department, local government, and the university also developed a task force called the Bloomsburg Initiative. The Bloomsburg Initiative is composed of representatives from local governments, university students and faculty, local schools, the legal system, and liquor establishments. The Initiative was developed to educate, prevent, deter, and provide alternatives to alcohol use and abuse and prevent problems associated with binge drinking. Police attend forums, workshops, and dormitory meetings on campus to discuss problems with alcohol use and other safety issues.

The Bloomsburg Police Department has successfully managed alcohol enforcement and education pieces to make a difference in Bloomsburg. Police do not expect to realize reductions in arrests until a full cycle of university students come to realize that police vigilance will be forever ongoing. The town has experienced many positive effects as a result of the police department's efforts, and the public safety of all residents in the Town of Bloomsburg has been improved.

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