

A Call to Action: Stop Youth Alcohol Consumption

On behalf of the Town of Truckee Police Department, I extend my condolences to the families, Truckee High School students and staff affected by the recent traffic fatality of one of our students. Although this fatality did not involve alcohol and was an accident, like most, it was preventable and did not have to happen.

In spite of this tragedy some of our students continue to engage in celebration involving alcohol and drugs. Last night, our community nearly experienced another tragedy that could have resulted in the serious injury or death of several of our graduating seniors. An outdoor party involving youth and alcohol was held near Town. As this party ended, the group left in vehicles. One of which crashed into a tree causing the vehicle to overturn. The driver of this vehicle was a twenty year old male already on probation for DUI was found to be more than double the legal limit and arrested. We believe three or four youth passengers were in the vehicle with him at the time of the collision. They along with the rest of the vehicles and group fled before public safety personnel arrived. However, a seventeen year old student remained at the scene with the twenty year old driver. Miraculously, the driver was uninjured. We do not know if any of the students suffered any injuries because they fled prior to our arrival and their identities remain unknown. Officers found an active and unattended bon fire (on a designated Red Flag Warning day) at the party scene as well as evidence of significant alcohol consumption. Truckee Fire was called to extinguish the fire. Additionally, last night students were found at other remote party locations where marijuana was being used. Were these students going to get behind the wheel or be a passenger in a vehicle if TPD had not intervened?

This community has a youth alcohol problem. Do you know that according to the 2012 Tahoe-Truckee Healthy Kids Survey 52% of our 16-18 year olds reported they had consumed at least one alcoholic drink within 30 days of the survey? Do you know that 31% of our 16-18 year olds report smoking marijuana within the last 30 days of the survey? Do you know that over half of our 7th graders report riding in a vehicle with an adult who has been drinking?

In 2012 there were 13 traffic collisions (10% of all collisions) within the Town of Truckee limits that involved DUI drivers. TPD arrested 106 drivers (21% of all arrests) for DUI in 2012. These numbers do not include collisions or arrests that occurred outside the Town and were handled by CHP or other law enforcement agencies.

The Truckee Police Department remains highly concerned that more preventable tragedies will occur if the Truckee community does not change this culture. I am aware of and appreciate the celebratory traditions of the graduating class of Truckee High School. Graduation should be a time of celebration and pride for our students, our parents, and our community. One loss is too many but this year has been especially tragic with too many of our young people dying. Many traditions over the course of history were found to be harmful, wrong, and dangerous. We changed them and started new traditions. Tradition alone is not justification to accept the outcomes of this conduct. I have heard a variety of statements from some adult community members – “This is what our seniors do”, “I did it too and I

survived”, “They camp overnight so they’re not drinking and driving”, “I would rather provide the alcohol at my house where I at least know they’re not driving”. These statements send conflicting messages to our youth that drinking by seventeen and eighteen year old students are “ok” and acceptable to adults. Additionally, this approach is ripe for disaster. Can you be assured that a young person who is under the influence of alcohol will keep their promise of not driving or getting into the vehicle with someone who has been drinking? Adults hosting parties with alcohol or providing alcohol for youth camping trips is not only illegal but creates too many opportunities for things to go wrong. Some may feel it is the best approach and I respect a parent’s right to make those decisions within the confines of their home but those parents do not have the right to make that decision for other children. All the efforts of taking keys, locking doors, telling kids they can’t leave does not guarantee kids under the influence will not circumvent those efforts.

Drinking and driving are not the only risks associated with the tradition of seventeen and eighteen year old students consuming alcohol. The Truckee Police Department has experienced many others such as:

- Fire danger – TPD often finds active large bon fires left unattended at the conclusion of high school student parties. This has led to uncontrolled fires.
- Fire danger - On several occasions TPD and TFD have responded to injuries associated with drunken students falling into bon fires as well as the use of illegal fireworks that present a fire danger in our region.
- Sexual assault/regrettable sexual decisions – TPD has investigated a number of sexual related incidents involving adults having sex with minors, minors having sex, and actual assaults where the sex was reported as unwanted.
- Alcohol overdoses - On many occasions TPD has experienced students who drank alcohol in excess and experienced extreme sickness. Alcohol overdoses can lead to death.
- Physical fights and assaults, including assaults involving weapons.
- Weapons have been found at party scenes.
- Previous traffic fatalities from youth parties.

The Truckee Police Department and our regional public safety partners endeavored to provide a comprehensive prevention campaign over the course of this school year. Some examples of our activities include:

- Media releases regarding traffic safety
- Distracted driving campaign
- Every 15 Minutes DUI awareness program
- Community messages
- Partnership with Tahoe Truckee Future Without Drug Dependence (TT-FWDD)
- Formal and informal educational meetings with our school resource officer
- Partnership with Friday Night Live
- Partnership with Sober Graduation Program
- Tele-Community Town Hall Meeting

- Extra patrols
- Underage purchase enforcement campaigns with retailers and adult purchasers
- Strong partnership and communication with TTUSD

Each of these efforts not only included messages about drinking and driving but included the importance of responsible decision making as they navigate their travels into adulthood. Even after all of these efforts, we recognize we're still dealing with seventeen and eighteen year old students who are not always fully prepared to make the right decisions in conflicted situations involving peer pressure and their desire to have "fun."

Most importantly, it is the families of those involved in some of these regretful decisions that can be left with a lifetime of pain, but they are not alone. My staff and our public safety partners must respond to these events, consume the carnage with all of their senses, and carry those experiences with them for a lifetime as well. Preventable loss of life, especially a young life, is the most painful event public safety personnel must endure.

The risk to our community is too high. We cannot tolerate this behavior any longer. We need the community's help. I am asking our community to critically consider what is acceptable and what must change. Are our major community events too centered on alcohol? Are we sending a message to our youth that alcohol is required to have fun? Are we modeling appropriate behavior for our kids? The Truckee Police Department is committed to doing everything we can to prevent tragedies but we cannot do it alone. Active and engaged parents, modeling appropriate behavior are essential to arming our kids with the skills to make sound decisions. The same Healthy Kids survey cited earlier, noted the most significant reason kids choose not to drink is they do not want to disappoint their parents. If we believe this is true then we know adults' role modeling appropriately can make a difference. I'm asking you to make a difference. Something must change before we lose another young person.

For more information or to get involved please visit Tahoe Truckee Future Without Drug Dependence website at <http://www.ttfwdd.com/>. Parents can also go to the website and sign a Parent Committed Pledge that creates opportunities to discuss this issue with your family.

Sincerely,

Adam McGill

Chief of Police

Town of Truckee