



# Success Stories

Enforcing the Underage Drinking Laws Program

NEWS FROM THE FIELD

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## Enforcement & Policy Change in DeKalb City

The City of DeKalb in DeKalb County, Illinois is a college community that serves as home to Northern Illinois University (NIU), the second largest university in the State. NIU is surrounded by several liquor establishments that market heavily to the college student population and, many believe, regularly disregard the State's minimum purchase age (MPA) law. Concerned about the effect retailer practices was having on all underage youth, concerned residents within the county and State decided to act.

Representatives from the Illinois Department of Human Services, the Ben Gordon Center (a community-based nonprofit organization that provides a range of social services to children and adults in DeKalb County) DeKalb County Partnership for a Safe, Active and Family Environment (DCP/SAFE), the City of DeKalb Police Department, and the NIU campus police discussed ways to address the issue of underage drinking on and off campus. The groups concluded that at minimum, regular compliance check operations should be implemented. They also believed that youth should be engaged in developing prevention efforts.

To get everyone on the same page, DCP/SAFE and the DeKalb County State Attorney's Office co-hosted a "kickoff" event, the purpose of which was to communicate to alcohol retailers the importance of complying with the MPA law. Organizers sought to communicate this message in a non-threatening manner, and licensees were provided with an overview of upcoming enforcement efforts and information about the penalties for selling alcohol to a minor.

Youth were involved with the project from the onset. The project began with a training session geared specifically to youth. Youth attended merchant/vendor education trainings and alcohol enforcement trainings for law enforcement personnel. Youth also worked with the Mayor's Liquor Commissioner, State Attorney Ron Matekaitis, vendors and other liquor establishment personnel, and enforcement and community leaders in the course of increasing community attention to the problem of underage drinking. Based on the

information shared during this period, the DeKalb Liquor Commission and DeKalb City Council approved measures that reduced the hours of alcohol sale by one hour each day of the week.

In February 2003, the DeKalb Police Department began conducting compliance checks with the assistance of underage college students. In the spring, the department worked with younger youth to serve as underage buyers during observational compliance checks and shoulder tap operations that target third-party providers of alcohol. Observational compliance checks began in June with the goal of sharing information about what was observed with alcohol retailers. In August, NIU police began patrolling tailgating parties before football games and campus residence halls on Friday and Saturday nights.

All of this enforcement and educational activity produced a measurable decrease in the number of sales to minors. The retail noncompliance rate went from 54 percent in February 2003 to 25 percent in December of the same year. Media coverage of the activity was quite active during this period. Organizers believe that the increased publicity given to enforcement assisted in getting retailers to change behavior.

An advertising campaign at in the spring of 2004 addressed the issue of laws related to parents and other adults who serve alcohol to minors. The NIU student newspaper also ran a series of ads about liquor laws in the City of Dekalb. These laws also were put into poster format and displayed throughout the campus.

The enforcement work in DeKalb County was funded by a grant from OJDP's Enforcing Underage Drinking Laws Program through June 2004. Due to the project's success, however, the DeKalb Police Department, will continue the stepped up enforcement work. In the future, the project will be financed by the fines levied against the establishments or youth who break the law.

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