

Parents, Older Siblings Can Be Held Accountable for Underage Drinking

With an increase in the number of incidences involving underage drinking and binge drinking by teens on the weekends, be warned that Social Host Liability Laws are being passed throughout the country. These laws hold parents - and, often, older siblings or other legal-aged adults - accountable for hosting underage drinking events.

Two-thirds of teens who drink get their alcohol from parents or other adults, according to the 2003 National Academy of Sciences Report. "Some parents believe that it's safer for their teens to drink at home than to drink anywhere else," according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Yet the responsibility can rest squarely on parents' shoulders should something go wrong, as it too often does. For instance, a Pennsylvania parent was sentenced to a 1 - to 4 ½-year prison term for involuntary manslaughter after allowing underage students to drink at a party the parent hosted. Three students died in a drunk-driving accident after the party.

Social host liability laws hold adults who serve or provide alcohol to underage people criminally liable if that minor is killed or injured - or if that minor kills or injures someone else. The laws can also extend to parents who do not take sufficient measures to prevent underage drinking in their homes, even if they are not home when the drinking occurs. Parents can be charged for medical bills and property damage or sued for emotional pain and suffering, depending on how the specific laws are interpreted in your state.

Connecticut just passed a bill that allows misdemeanor charges to be filed against adults who knowingly allow anyone under 21 to possess alcohol on their property. Check out the nuances of your state laws, too, to see how social host liability is interpreted.

Teen Party Ordinances

And keep in mind that many communities also have teen party ordinances that make it illegal to host a party where underage students are drinking. Parents, older siblings, and friends can be arrested if they allow underage drinking to occur with their knowledge, even if they did not necessarily provide the alcohol. No one has to get hurt for these laws to kick in -- all it takes is alcohol being present at the party.

Be careful - and informed-before making choices about alcohol and underage students. Providing alcohol, hosting underage drinking events and more can get parents and older siblings in some legal hot water. Yet the human toll, from injury to death, is the most sobering possibility of all.

Sources:

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Family Guide at family.samhsa.gov/set/prosecuting.aspx; The Marin Institute Policies to Combat Underage Drinking Parties at http://www.marininstitute.org/alcohol_policy/socialhost_teenparties.htm; PRNewswire, "60 Minutes" Focuses on Parents Hosting Alcohol Parties for Minors, August 19, 2005; On Board Online, Vol. 7 No. 4, February 27, 2006 from the New York State Association of School Attorneys; Connecticut Moves to Punish Parents Who Host Teen Drinking Parties, Jointogether.org, April 21, 2006.