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## Fining party hosts

In almost a year, laws seem to crimp drinking parties

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Keeping tabs on her daughter's whereabouts was never an issue for Ojai resident Kathy Dawson.

Dawson's 17-year-old daughter, Chloe Walker, usually tells her mother about her activities at school and which party she is attending and at whose house.

But when Dawson heard about an Ojai ordinance that would fine a party host if minors consume alcohol, Dawson thought that it was a good idea.

"You can't know necessarily everything that goes on, and I don't want to police my child," Dawson said. "But I do believe there needs to be some accountability. I think it has made more parents at least more aware and more responsible. It takes the pressure away from the children."

Since January, seven cities in Ventura County — Ojai, Camarillo, Fillmore, Moorpark, Simi Valley, Santa Paula and Thousand Oaks — have adopted a Social Host Ordinance. The Ventura City Council will consider a similar ordinance in the next few months, said Daniel Hicks, program administrator for Ventura County Limits Project, a community partnership dedicated to addressing underage and binge drinking.

Under the ordinance, the host could be fined if police were called to respond to a party where people under the age of 21 are consuming or possess alcohol. The fines range from \$500 to \$2,500, Ventura County Sheriff's Department officials said.

So far, sheriff's deputies have written nine citations in Ojai and unincorporated areas near the city. Sheriff's deputies in Camarillo and Thousand Oaks have issued two. Camarillo has the lowest fine at \$500, and Thousand Oaks the highest at \$2,500.

Party numbers are down

Law enforcement officials said that since the ordinance was implemented in their cities, unruly parties with underage drinking have become less frequent.

"We found we have less parties in the entire Ojai Valley this year," Ojai Police Chief Bruce Norris said. "It's still too early to say that's why it has decreased, but in talking to deputies, they told me they seem to be responding to less parties where there is underage drinking. We want the public to know if you are going to host a party like that, there could be ramifications."

The goal of the ordinance is not only to curb underage drinking, but also to prevent the dangerous domino effect that occurs at unruly parties, Thousand Oaks Police Department Commander Dennis Carpenter said.

Drinking at parties sometimes leads to vandalism, fights, binge drinking, drunken driving or even sexual assault. Virtually every sexual assault on a female minor happens when that female is intoxicated, Carpenter

said.

"Starting Friday and Saturday nights and when the kids are out of school during vacation, we see kids searching for parties or going from one party to another," Carpenter said. "Some parents are turning a blind eye to the problem and think their children are safe. We want to change the environment where kids are hanging out."

To help combat underage drinking, the county Behavioral Health Department was awarded a three-year federal grant in October 2004 to examine the growing problem and develop a plan of attack, Hicks said.

Under the grant, the Ventura County Limits Project conducted phone surveys to gather facts and figures about drinking behaviors. According to its results, binge drinking among Ventura County youths begins at an early age. High school students report binge drinking at higher rates than the state average. About 14 percent of ninth-graders and 27 percent of 11th-graders in the county report heavy drinking episodes.

Home parties appeared as a high-risk setting for local youth. About 29 percent of adults 25 and younger engage in binge drinking at home, while 45 percent have binged at someone else's home.

Binge drinking is another problem that law enforcement and city officials hope to curtail through the ordinance.

Drinkers can be hospitalized

"We have instances in Ojai Valley where a kid passed out and had to be rushed to the hospital because of extreme intoxication," Norris said. "If we can decrease the danger to the kids, then we have accomplished the purpose of the ordinance."

The staggering numbers are just part of the reason why law enforcement, city officials and the Ventura County Limits Project pushed for Social Host Ordinances in cities and unincorporated areas across the county. The Ventura County Limits Project's next goal is to work with city leaders to make sure that cities have effective policies to manage alcohol retailers, Hicks said.

"Up until the ordinance, the only thing police could do was disperse the party, which would just move to another place," Hicks said. "One of the most important results of this is the word on the street among young people. You don't want to be caught as the host of one of these parties. It's not just a slap on the wrist anymore."

Administrators from community organizations like the Boys & Girls Clubs and other youth groups throughout the county are also working to provide fun and safe alternatives to drinking parties.

At the Boys & Girls Club of Camarillo, monthly dances for Camarillo junior high students and Friday movie nights, which are held at least once a month, help keep teens busy, said Greg Stuart, president and CEO. The Camarillo facility has about 3,000 young members.

At the Alex Fiore Thousand Oaks Teen Center, it's the combination of educational workshops, excursions, classes and special events that keep thousands of teens in a safe environment and out of trouble, said Brenda Coleman, teen services director.

Teens can hang out daily at the Thousand Oaks Teen Center's 1,700-square-foot game room or play music with their rock bands in the soundproof room. There are workshops and classes from ceramics to hip-hop dancing. The center also holds special events like concerts and fashion shows.

Many alternatives available

"These programs always draw a number of participants, and we offer a lot of positive alternatives," Coleman said. "I think when teens have a safe place to enjoy their leisure time and a place that they can call their own, it does lead to a healthier community."

At the Ojai Valley Youth Foundation, students can enjoy Wednesday pizza nights and other leadership activities throughout the week.

Chloe Walker said her involvement with the Ojai Valley Youth Foundation has helped her prioritize what's important. She also supports Ojai's Social Host Ordinance.

"Safety is the most important thing," said Walker, a senior at Nordhoff High School in Ojai. "You don't necessarily need to go to those parties to have fun."