

WESTBOROUGH

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Police: Party's over for parents Chief seeks charges over teen drinking

By Jennifer Rosinski, Globe Correspondent | October 1, 2006

For what may be the first time, Westborough police are taking parents to court to face allegations that they hosted an underage drinking party at their home.

“When we arrived at the house, the father was outside washing down the vomit from his deck, and there were red plastic cups all over the place,” Police Chief Alan R. Gordon said. “There was vomit on the street. There had to be a number of kids who were drinking excessively.”

The case is scheduled to be heard in a closed session Oct. 24, with the names of the parents and location released only if formal charges are filed.

Police raided the party, which occurred in August, after a Westborough teenager was involved in an automobile accident. Officers said he admitted to drinking three plastic cups of beer at the party.

Gordon said he hoped this case puts parents on notice that serving alcohol to underage guests is not only unsafe but illegal, and police will file charges “any time we get evidence there is drinking going on. It's serious.”

A group of parents from Westborough and neighboring towns is working to raise awareness about the problems of underage drinking.

“These situations are coming up more and more,” said Ann Taggart, a Northborough mother of two who founded the Home Safety Network two years ago. “We've got to be more vigilant about keeping our kids safe.”

The group will hold a forum to explain state laws covering alcohol consumption by minors at 7:30 p.m. Oct. 17 at Algonquin Regional High School in Northborough. The group has already made a presentation to the Westborough School Committee, and plans to appear before the school committees in Northborough and Southborough.

“I think that a lot of parents think hosting a party is a lot safer than letting them go out and get drunk somewhere else,” Taggart said. “What I think they don't get is when they're making a choice for their child, they're also making a choice for someone else's children.”

A clerk-magistrate at Westborough District Court will preside at the hearing on whether the parents should be charged with furnishing alcoholic beverages to a person under 21. The charge carries a

maximum penalty of a year in jail and a \$2,000 fine.

"I feel confident they did what the allegations say," Gordon said. "The parents were home while their underage child was hosting a party where there were alcoholic beverages. The parents were aware of it and allowed it to take place."

The party was held Aug. 22 as a sendoff for a college freshman, and drew roughly 30 teenagers, Gordon said, with most of them high school seniors.

Jason Arnold, now a freshman at Bridgewater State College, was one of the guests, the chief said.

The 18-year-old was pulled over on Route 30 shortly after 11 that night, Gordon said. His Pontiac, which had front-end damage, matched the description provided by a driver who had just alerted police that her Volvo had been hit on Haskell Street, police said.

The woman was taken to UMass Memorial Medical Center in Worcester with minor injuries.

Although the police report indicates that Arnold admitted to drinking at the party, he passed a field sobriety test. Police said they found marijuana and rolling papers in the back of Arnold's car, and a half-empty bottle of Bacardi Grand Melon in the pouch behind the passenger seat. Arnold told police the rum belonged to a female friend.

Arnold was charged with leaving the scene of an accident, possessing marijuana, and possessing liquor as a minor.

"We're just terribly upset," said Arnold's father, Robert, who added that he didn't know the people who hosted the party.

Arnold's mother, Kathy said: "As a parent, I know we're all trying to keep a lid on teen drinking as much as we can. But I do know it's very hard to police what the kids are bringing in. . . . It's just so easy for them to bring something in, and the parents don't know it."

Gordon, who has been on the force for more than 20 years, said this was the first time he can recall that Westborough police had enough evidence to pursue charges against parents for serving underage teens. Typically, Gordon said, the department receives anonymous calls after a party has taken place.

"I send letters out to parents and advise them what the laws are," said Gordon, who has written five so far. "For some reason, I'm getting more reports. I think people are getting a little leery of these parties taking place, and they're wanting us to take action."

Under state law, parents and grandparents are allowed to supply alcohol to their children and grandchildren, but providing alcohol to others under the age of 21 is prohibited. The state also has a social host law that holds people responsible if a guest leaves their party drunk and injures someone else.

Westborough police are not alone in their fight to curb teen drinking parties. Departments in Northborough and Southborough say they too want to take a stand.

At Tuesday's selectmen meeting in his town, Southborough Police Chief William Webber presented an underage drinking policy that instructs officers to administer sobriety tests to all teenagers before they can leave the scene of a rowdy party.

Northborough Police Chief Mark Leahy said he, too, is drawing up a policy on how to handle underage drinking.

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