

Underage drinking is a big issue during holiday season

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By **LINDA BLASER** Staff Writer

Local police and community leaders urge parents to remember that it is illegal for anyone under the age of 21 to drink alcohol -- even if it's New Year's Eve.

"The police department has made a commitment to the residents of Lake Forest to enforce the age of 21 alcohol laws," Lake Forest Deputy Police Chief Glenn Burmeister said in an e-mail, noting that the department has been "very active" in the past year with monitoring alcohol compliance.

But liquor stores, restaurants and bars selling alcohol to under-age drinkers is just one part of the problem, said Stacy Vermynen, executive director of LEAD, which stands for Linking Efforts Against Drugs. The community organization is dedicated to parents and other adults and their role in the promotion of healthy family relationships and the prevention of alcohol and other drug use and risky behavior by youth.

At this time of year, LEAD is focusing on parents providing their under-age college and high school students with alcohol or allowing parties to be held where drinking is happening.

"I know they drink in college, but the law is 21," Vermynen said of many young adults who are home on break. "This is definitely the time of year when parents should be alert about underage drinking."

Vermynen cites a recent report called Monitoring the Future Study that indicates underage drinking is down for 12th graders nationally. Yet not so in Lake Forest and Lake Bluff.

Seniors drink

"The situation here is quite a bit different from the national" trend, Vermynen said. In the past 30 days, 75 percent of 12th graders in Lake Forest and Lake Bluff indicated they used alcohol, well up from a national average of 44.4 percent. Those who indicated they were "drunk" in Lake Forest and Lake Bluff was 54.6 percent, nearly double the 28.7 percent average.

The drinking level for 10th graders in the past 30 days locally is somewhat better, yet still above the national average.

Locally, 47.3 percent of 10th graders reported drinking alcohol in the past 30 days, compared to a 33.4 percent national average. In addition, 26.5 percent of local 10th graders reported being drunk in the past 30 days as opposed to 18.1 percent nationally.

The increased number of parties during the holidays for returning college students and those still in high school rises dramatically at this time of year, Vermynen notes.

"We know we have a particularly tough situation here," Vermynen said. She cites high affluence, access to transportation, low-perceived harm in the community and large homes as contributing factors.

"Kids might be having a party and drinking in another part of the house without your knowledge," Vermynen warned. She urges parents to check on their students regularly throughout the night.