

- 1 Making Community Events Safer
- 5 Q&A with Kathy Long
- 7 Straight Up Promotes Social Change with Reality Improv

The Ventura County edition of Prevention File is published in cooperation with the Ventura County Behavioral Health Department, Training, Applied Research and Alcohol and Drug Prevention Division.

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MAKING COMMUNITY EVENTS SAFER

THE NEWBURY PARK ROTARIANS haven't ever had serious problems at their annual Oktoberfest event, but they know that special care is required when they're serving beer to up to 10,000 guests.

That's why when an organization called Project SAFER offered to lend them a hand with enhancing safety at their two-day, 2005 festival, they were happy to accept the offer. Project SAFER representatives met with Oktoberfest planners and alcohol servers to provide instruction on alcohol laws, on ID checking and responsible beverage service, and on security around the beer garden and parking lot.

"They had some fabulous advice, and they were very gracious," said Mary-Catherine McBride, chairperson of the event. "This was our 19th annual Oktoberfest, and we haven't had any problems yet, but, goodness gracious, you don't ever want to presume you know

everything. They (Project SAFER) promote alcohol safety, and we certainly embrace that."

Project SAFER was started in Ventura County last year with funding from the Ventura County Behavioral Health Department, Training, Applied Research and Alcohol and Drug Prevention Division. SAFER stands for "Safety Assessments for Event Remediation."

The mission of the organization is to enhance the safety at special events in the County of Ventura by assessing those events, identifying issues of public health and safety, and identifying if alcohol service is consistently administered within the laws and guidelines established by State and local authorities.

"Our goal is not to stop events from serving alcohol," said Kim O'Neil, director of Project SAFER. "What we want is to see that alcohol is served safely." By assessing community events and sharing results with event organizers, Project





SAFER strives to assist in the creation of policies to reduce unlawful alcohol service and to eliminate alcohol access to minors and others who are underage. These policies will assist in the reduction of alcohol-related violence, sexual assault, injury and vehicle crashes. The organization provides trainings free of charge to non-profit organizations hosting special events who are seeking to implement or improve their event policies.

O'Neil said that Project SAFER has conducted assessments of 20 community events and they all have different levels of alcohol prevention measures in place. Some events have many, rigorous alcohol service policies with consistent staff/volunteer enforcement while a few have little visible indications of policies for serving alcohol; however, the vast majority fall somewhere right in the middle of the spectrum, having posted policies with inconsistent enforcement.

"When contacting event organizers to share the assessment of their event, there have been mixed reactions," said O'Neil, "Some welcome feedback from our assessments with open arms and are quick to incorporate suggested changes. Others can be very hesitant. Sometimes it is because they think there are no problems at their events. Others are concerned that they have problems but they don't want them documented. Once we are able to show them that by addressing the issues identified in the assessment we can help them build a healthier and safer community event and reduce their liability, they usually are anxious to partner with us."

That may not always be the case, however, since many community events are funded in large part by the alcohol industry. The industry apparently finds such events to be good places to advertise or sell its products. Event organizers may use a sponsor's alcohol banners and products without giving it much thought.

Project SAFER staff believe that there is often too much alcohol sponsorship at special events, but the alcohol industry entices non-profit organizations that are operating on shoe-string budgets. It's hard for them to resist that.

However, alcohol industry sponsorship comes with a cost. The tone and focus of the event is often primarily alcohol and even the availability of non-alcoholic beverages can be dictated by the alcohol industry sponsor. At a Taste of Orange County event the alcohol industry sponsor mandated that the only non-alcoholic beverage that could be sold at the entire event was Snapple. At some events assessed by Project SAFER it is not unusual to have to work to find booths that sell water or other non-alcoholic beverages.

Project SAFER provides groups with information about how other non-alcohol sponsors have participated in events throughout Ventura County. That gives the event organizers ideas of what other types of companies or services could be possible sponsors for their event.

"Sponsoring an event provides exposure that can attract new customers to a company or product. It only makes sense that if the attendees of an event would be the demographic fit for a product, the company would want to sponsor it," said O'Neil.

O'Neil is concerned when she sees beer sponsors donating a large number of alcohol-related banners. When using signs and banners, it shapes the perception of the environment and how event attendees will respond. If a majority of the hanging banners represent an alcohol company, the attendees may lose sight of the real reason for the event. Oftentimes, those banners are at the eye level of children.

"When you see banners hung on fences that are no taller than three feet it seems obvious that they are geared toward kids," she said. "When doing an assessment, we take things

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into account such as the alcohol banner ratio to non-alcohol banners, and youth attendees ratio to adult attendees. This can be observed by randomly picking a cluster or row of ten sponsorship banners (not located in a beer garden) and noting how many are alcohol related and how many are not. To determine the percentage of youth present at an event, we conduct random counts of 100 people noting who appears to be over or under 21 years of age. With this type of information, we can gauge if there is heavy alcohol sponsorship, and if it appropriate for the percentage of youth attending the event.

O'Neil first had experience with shaping the environment at special events when she was the coalition coordinator for the Ventura LGBT Coalition, which was also funded by the Ventura County Behavioral Health Department, Training, Applied Research and Alcohol and Drug Prevention Division. The Ventura County Rainbow Alliance holds an annual "Pride" event, and there had been some problems involving alcohol at that event. In 1997, the LGBT Coalition developed policies and a checklist to emphasize responsible beverage service and safety at the annual celebration. O'Neil and the large LGBT coalition membership helped to keep the policies enforced through the years, and were instrumental in developing alcohol-free events for the LGBT community and distributing an LGBT party planner that promoted the responsible use of alcohol at home parties.

With Project SAFER, this work is continuing . . . but on a broader basis.

To assist in her work, O'Neil has developed a five-page assessment tool, which covers the various aspects of community events where alcohol is being served. Some of the areas covered include:

- Advertising: Is advertising for the event focused on activities at the event or on alcohol? Is there an overabundance of alcohol advertising at the event site?

- Parking Lot: Is it safe? Are people using it as a location to drink alcohol? What type of supervision is there in the parking lot?
- Security: Is the security adequate for the number of event participants? Are security personnel paid or volunteers? Are they trained?
- Alcohol Policies: Does the group have specific policies regarding how alcohol is served and to whom? Have those people who are serving the alcohol been trained to serve responsibly? Is there appropriate checking of IDs?

This assessment tool is not only helpful to assess the actual event, but to help planning committees to plan well.

With the Oktoberfest in Newbury Park, for instance, Project SAFER representatives attended several planning meetings and provided the group and their alcohol servers with safety information. They provided instructions on how to check IDs, how to spot false IDs, and how to handle inebriated customers. Project SAFER recommended that the group use ID bracelets that were difficult to remove, so they could not be transferred to other people. It was also suggested that alcohol servers work in coordination with security in case they experienced any difficulties with customers.

"They provided very good guidance and training," McBride said. "It was really very comforting."

Project SAFER's Remediation Coordinator Vicky Fliss also provided a follow-up assessment, which was designed to help the group when planning its next event, the 20th annual Oktoberfest, this year.

Fliss, the parent of twin teenage boys, said she became involved in alcohol and drug prevention work because, "I have great concern over how the alcohol industry markets to youth and



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the general acceptance of over-indulging at public events. I had often avoided attending special events with my children for that very reason. Working with Project SAFER was my first opportunity to become an active part of the solution.

"The goal in sharing information from our assessments is to create policies and procedures to help make an event safer for communities that might

otherwise be affected by alcohol-related behavior," Fliss said.

Fliss believes that event coordinators can establish environments "that discourage over-consumption and minimize youth access to alcohol, resulting in reduced alcohol-related injuries or deaths throughout our communities."

Ben Stilp, executive director of Ventura's Rainbow Alliance, said Project Safer helped his group create just that type of environment at their Gay Pride event last summer.

"One of the concerns we have is about the disproportionate rate of drug and alcohol abuse among our community (the gay community) in general," Stilp said. "Project SAFER helped us with environmental tone-setting."

Stilp said that restricting access to the event's beer garden and training alcohol servers to serve responsibly "sent a clear signal that we were serious about this. As a result, people were respectful, and many owned the concern."

According to Stilp, an off-duty police officer that they hired to help with security at the event said it was the first time he had seen an event of that size (1,500 people) that served alcohol take place with no incidents whatsoever.

O'Neil said Project SAFER will continue to move full speed ahead as they assess special

events around the county, share their assessments with event organizers, train event staff, recruit residents to be involved in the process and give feedback to event coordinators who have made policy changes.

Project SAFER has developed relationships with the Ventura County Sheriff's Department, which has responsibility for all unincorporated areas in the county as well as half of the counties' ten cities, and several other police agencies. Plans are underway to work with cities concerning their alcohol-related policies and their use of conditional use permits for events at which alcohol is served. O'Neil says these relationships are critical because recommendations can be made, but if there are no municipally imposed conditions on special events, or if there is no enforcement at the event, the important information gained by the assessments and the ensuing recommendation can just be ignored by problematic events.

O'Neil said in closing: "What we want communities and event coordinators to understand is that we are working on prevention measures. There's a big difference between managing people after they have been drinking and managing the setting before anyone starts. If the rules are clearly posted and fully enforced, event coordinators and the community are likely experience a reduction in problems." □

Q&A WITH KATHY LONG



On January 11, 2005, Kathy I. Long took the oath of office and officially began her third term as the Supervisor for Ventura County Third District. Supervisor Long's district includes Camarillo, California State University – Channel Islands, Port Hueneme, Southeast Oxnard, East Oxnard Plain, Santa Paula, Fillmore, Piru, Lockwood Valley, and Eastern Portion of Naval Base Ventura County Port Hueneme. In this interview with Prevention File she discusses her interest in preventing underage and binge drinking by Ventura County's youths and young adults.

You introduced the concept of a social host liability ordinance for Ventura County and that new law is now under consideration. How did you come to be part of this effort?

A: In a couple of ways. One was through the Behavioral Health Department and the work that it was doing in surveying the community to identify problems related to drinking by teenagers and young adults. The findings were brought to our countywide Community Commission, which is made up of representatives from schools, cities, the county, and county community based organizations. The Community Commission is very interested in the issues of underage drinking and binge drinking. Then the Behavioral Health Department and the steering committee for its Ventura County Limits initiative, which had investigated a model social host liability ordinance to reduce problems related to house parties, asked me if I would be interested in carrying it to the board. I agreed to do so.

Are there other jurisdictions in the county that have a social host liability ordinance?

A: The two cities in our county that have adopted a social host liability ordinance are Fillmore and Ojai. If the Ventura County Board of Supervisors adopts this, it would go into effect in the unincorporated areas of the county. But more importantly, by the Board adopting it clearly sends a message to the cities and raises the bar for them to consider it as well, so that it can become a countywide norm. We know that our teenagers don't understand municipal boundaries, so the intent is to really set this in motion for the rest of the cities.

As a member of the Ventura County Board of Supervisors, why are the issues of underage and binge drinking important to you?

A: I have a teenager—so that's certainly a personal reason. But looking at the statistics that our law enforcement and Behavioral Health Department officials put together through the survey, we were clearly seeing a problem in our community. We see it in the traffic crashes where teenagers, who already represent a high rate, have increased risk when they have been drinking. That's a public safety risk and a risk to the teenagers themselves. In addition, statistics in our county were showing that children as young as middle school talked about having a drink. We were also seeing house parties spring up through the text messaging so popular among youths—parties that occur on the spur-of-the-moment when the parents leave town for a minute that sometimes necessitated a public

safety responses. We were seeing increase community incidences that were going up and felt that we needed to address this problem.

Countywide, you mentioned the Community Commission. Are there other forums for you and other elected officials to address mutual concerns regarding public health and safety and community well-being?

A: Besides the Community Commission, we have our Council of Governments, where all ten cities and the County Board of Supervisors come together to talk about regional issues. A lot of the cities have youth commissions and or task forces. Both Fillmore and Ojai have active ones, so they are a resource for us. Over the last couple of years the Community Commission has been focusing on other areas of concern in our community, such as obesity, homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse. In fact on March 2 there is a municipal forum on community alcohol issues and strategies for local leaders. We are trying to get the community dialogue going and get these concerns on the front page so that our parents and our

leaders will become engaged in developing responses to reduce problems related to underage and binge drinking,

Drinking is an unspoken right of passage for teenagers. Culturally, some of this may be the tradition that once a teenager reaches the age of 16 or 18 even parents may allow then to drink in the home. We need to get information out that there are acceptable ranges of activities and

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there are unacceptable ones—and it's unacceptable when it spills out into public streets in the community and poses public safety issues.

Ventura County was fortunately selected to be one of the 13 counties to receive the state incentive grant to address underage and binge drinking. As a result you now have the Ventura County Limits Project. How are you involved in that effort?

A: I have been involved through our Community Commission, of which I am co-chair along with Juvenile Court Judge, Brian Back. We have been working with the project through the Behavioral Health Department as they developed the survey, conducted the statistic analysis and then researched the model social host liability ordinance.

Do you think an effort like this requires a lot of collaboration? How difficult it is to get people to sit down and collaborate on these things?

A: Absolutely. It requires collaboration in the sense that you have to involve community-based organizations that are either already engaged in services to help with interventions with youths. Generally, it is also looking at the household and the parents and helping them with parent education and providing programs and services to families. It is important that the community-based organizations tell us what works and what doesn't. By having them at the table, we can have that dialogue. With the Community Commission, our intent was to bring people together to see if we are duplicating services, where the gaps in services are, and where we strengthen services. That's where the collaboration is invaluable.

The other area that we are working on where collaboration is important is with our outreach media piece to get the attention of both the teenager and adults. I think that one of the most persuasive anti-drug campaigns that was launched had the "here's your brain on drugs" image with the fried egg. We also know from our anti-tobacco campaigns that we have to have a message that gets their attention, that is

entertaining. If we can engage youths in the solution, they can help us with that message. That's what the Commission work does and will continue to do—and that's where the collaboration is invaluable.

Other than the social host liability ordinance, which a lot of jurisdictions around the country are looking at, what other kinds of public policy strategies would you like to pursue to making lasting changes in Ventura County with regard to underage and binge drinking.

A: I think parent education will be key, as well as outreach to our schools so that we get to children at an early age when they start talking about drinking. As I mentioned earlier, if drinking is considered a right of passage because of cultural conditions, then reaching parents to explore that with them and to give them the information they need as far as the risk that's involved whether it's a right of passage or a part of the family's norm. I think that the social host ordinance is a key local policy to get that message out there. Other policies might include looking at how we allocate funds so that we can have family resource centers in our communities, stronger family outreach and orientation on the risk of drinking by youths. With schools, we know the statistics—kids are entering the drinking risk stage at the 6th and 7th grade levels.

Do you think that the public understands and supports policy-based approaches like the social host liability ordinance?

A: I think they do. It's kind of like a 12-Step program; you take it one step at a time. Generally, people don't want government to be in their homes, where they have their rights and privacy. But the social host liability ordinance isn't impinging on those rights. What it does do is address the public safety impacts outside the home that arise from situations that develop within the home boundary. Obviously, education is needed to gain public understanding and support of these approaches. For example, the faith community is at the table in our collaboration and they are very instrumental in helping us to get this message out and conducting that parent education and youth outreach.

What role do you think the public adults and youth alike can play in changing community conditions that contribute to alcohol-related problems?

A: Again, to be most effective it has to come from our youth—once we are able to reach them and they understand the risks. Unfortunately in our county, we have these rights of passage such as graduation and senior proms that involve drinking. In Ventura County, we have very engaged communities in that they sponsor prom activities to encourage sober prom nights. The same thing is true with graduation, but unfortunately we still have tragedies where youth are killed in automobile crash as a result of celebrating on a graduation night. When those tragedies make the front page, people get more interested in what we can do differently as a community to save lives. It has to come from a communication, collaboration and cooperation from parents, teachers, community leaders, and youths. They all have to help us with the message and the solution.

How do you envision community life in Ventura County improving because of these new public policies to prevent alcohol and drug abuse?

A: The public safety piece is a given in that the more we can engage our youths and lower the risks, we can have safer streets and save lives. We won't have the challenges with the spur-of-the-moment house party that raises havoc in the community. There has been a lot of focus on binge drinking and although I think it's been more at that freshman college level, our report showed that we had cases here even at the high school level. I think that if we work together on this to raise the bar and if people don't see this is a government driven top-down initiative, but really a grassroots effort to implement an important model to use to reach our goals, then we will have a safer community. It will be open communication between parents and youths, schools and youths, and law enforcement and youths. You have to repeat a message in advertising seven times so that it has an impact. All-in-all Ventura County will benefit—there is no question about that. □

STRAIGHT UP

promotes Social Change with Reality Improv

STRAIGHT UP IS AN ACTIVE PARTICIPANT IN VENTURA COUNTY LIMITS, a community partnership working county-wide to reduce underage and binge drinking. In this interview Project Director Katherine Boring explains how Straight Up engages youth, bringing their voices and participation to the Ventura County Limits partnership.

When you created Project STRAIGHT UP—how did you decide to take this approach to dealing with alcohol problems?

A: Straight Up was developed at the same time that the Behavioral Health Department was launching Ventura County Limits. It's a new approach to youth involvement, and it uses theater techniques and other strategies to create change in our community.

There has been alarming growth of binge drinking in the 15 to 25 age group in Ventura County. In 2004, surveys of county residents showed lots of concern about underage drinking and its impact not only on young people, but on neighborhoods and communities. Teens and young adults have received education about the dangers of alcohol since they were in elementary school. They've been lectured to, warned and grounded. They've watched videos made to scare them into "behaving." These kinds of prevention efforts are not proving to be effective. And there is a lot of frustration.

People are asking, what can be done to change things? But it's not hopeless. What is proving to be effective across the country is an environmental approach—involving the whole community in changing the factors in the environment that encourage underage and binge drinking. That's why the Ventura County Limits

partnership includes colleges, high schools, law enforcement, city government, and community organizations. I believe youth participation is critical for this process to have lasting success.

How is Straight Up different from the things that have been tried before?

A: First of all, our goal is not to educate or inform. We do that along the way, but that's not what we are promoting. We promote social change. That begins with an honest dialogue about what is really going on in our communities regarding youth and alcohol use. What has become normal? What are the attitudes in our society about drinking? What are the pressures, the stressors, the influences, the examples? All of these social issues are environmental factors, part of the context in which they make their decisions. Some things are the same from one place to the next and others are specific and different in different neighborhoods around the county. These are not things we tell youth. These are things we need to hear from them.

How are you able to get an honest open dialogue?

A: That's where Reality Improv is very effective. We call our techniques "Reality Improv" because we are using improvisation exercises and skills along with specialized theatre techniques specifically designed to address real social issues—to promote dialogue within communities. The way to get this is to "keep it real." Young people know when you're trying sell them something, and when you're really trying to understand and help.

What are some examples of how you do this?

A: We start with simple and fun exercises that get everybody on their feet, starting to focus,





making eye-contact with each other and using their voices. The atmosphere changes dramatically in a short period of time and people open up. We use Image Theatre activities in which situations, conflicts and decisions regarding alcohol are portrayed physically by the participants. They talk about the details of what they see and how it relates to their real experiences in their own social circles, at their parties, in their families. These issues are important and relevant to our youth and they want to talk about them. We are giving them a way to reflect on and evaluate their social world and develop critical analysis and insight around the issues.

And this gets them thinking about changing things?

A: It's interesting to hear them say what they think, what they think others think and then get to what they really feel about an issue. It's great for them to hear each other. It's important for them to talk about what their perceptions are and often discover their misperceptions within this kind of discussion. Then, through Forum Theatre, participants explore their ideas for change and can discuss possible personal and community solutions.

What kinds of issues do they identify and act out?

A: The most common issues center around what's going on with parties. A lot of teens feel it's pretty much impossible to have a party without alcohol. Parties easily get large and out of

control especially with cell phones and websites like Myspace.com. And alcohol is usually the main event. Drinking games are common and are a quick and fun way to get right to the goal of being drunk. There's social pressure to drink and to drink a lot.

As one young adult said "Everybody gets caught up in the game and group mentality and calling each other chicken and stuff. But if you asked any of them individually, they would say they think it's stupid." These are the kinds of things that we want them to hear from each other. Understanding things like this can help them make different choices, and also join in with community efforts.

What about the role of parents in all of this?

A: There are some pretty strong opinions and feelings that parents are not aware enough of what's really going on, that "parents need to get educated" and that they need to take a different approach with their teens.

For many of the young people we've talked with, alcohol use is specifically related to sexual decisions and activity. There is understandably a lot of conflicting feelings. Even students who seem to be holding back in the workshops speak up once their button is pushed by something they personally identify as 'wrong' with what's going on. And there are always plenty of buttons getting pushed as we delve into the real and specific situations the youth are experiencing.

What are your plans now for the Straight Up project?

A: Straight Up activities are going on at all three community colleges and in high schools throughout the county. From the workshops we find interested and enthused students and faculty

and participate in alcohol prevention efforts with them on their campus. We offer improv workshops and performances which draw youth to our program as well as skill development to our troupe members. We're also working with youth groups throughout the county and helping them to get started on effective projects to reduce underage and binge drinking. As a result of Straight Up activities in Simi Valley, community members are forming a new coalition of community leaders, organizations and youth to address these issues in their City. That is what the Straight Up project is all about . . . being a catalyst for action towards community change. And that's our plan—to work toward solutions at the community level, not talking to young people, but learning from and working with them to reduce underage and binge drinking in Ventura County.

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