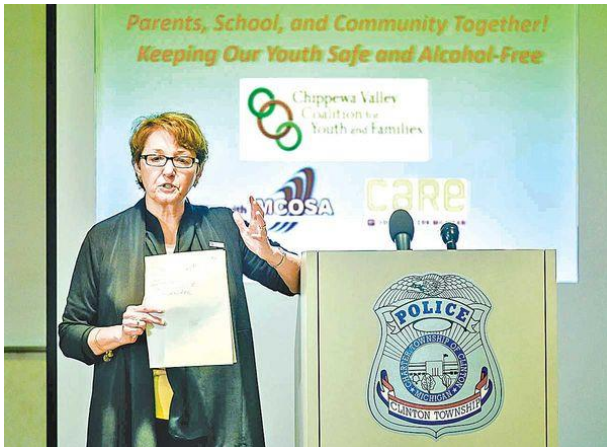


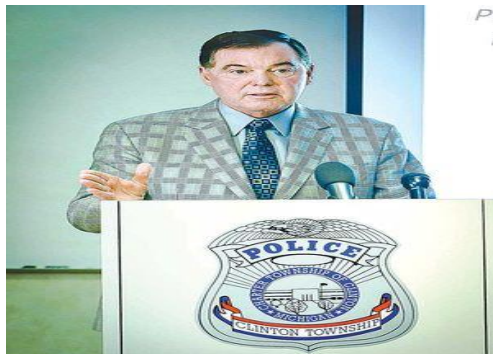
Local students encouraged to enjoy sober prom, graduation

By Nick Mordowanec



Charlene McGunn, executive director of the Chippewa Valley Coalition for Youth and Families, discusses youth alcohol data April 18 at the Clinton Township Police Department. (Photo by Deb Jacques)

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Clinton Township Supervisor Bob Cannon tells attendees personal stories. (Photo by Deb Jacques)



McKenzie Reed and Courtney McGanity — both sophomores at Chippewa Valley High School — listen to speakers. (Photo by Deb Jacques)

CLINTON TOWNSHIP/MACOMB TOWNSHIP — Teens in Macomb County will soon be flocking to prom, while others will be saying their final goodbyes at graduation.

Local officials and community leaders want to make the message clear: You can have fun without alcohol.

On April 18 at the Clinton Township Police Department, politicians, members of law enforcement, and three groups of Chippewa Valley High School and Dakota High School students discussed the dangers of alcohol abuse among teens.

Charlene McGunn, executive director of the Chippewa Valley Coalition for Youth and Families, said alcohol is the primary issue revolving around kids. That's because the effects can be detrimental for decades afterward.

"One irrefutable fact that we know is that if we can prevent teen alcohol use, we can prevent a large amount of adult addiction because the majority of adults that become addicted to alcohol have started in adolescence," McGunn said.

She referenced a 2015-16 Michigan Profile for Healthy Youth survey, which is administered every two years under the Michigan Department of Education and Health and Human Services as a way to assess student behaviors.

As part of the survey, seventh-, ninth- and 11th-graders in districts statewide are asked questions related to alcohol use and attainment. McGunn said that 73 percent of 11th-graders said it was easy to get alcohol, while 29 percent and 54 percent of seventh- and ninth-graders, respectively, said the same thing.

Statistics are decreasing in a positive way, McGunn noted, with 28 percent of Chippewa Valley 11th-graders reporting alcohol use during the last 30 days. Also, there has been a steady decline of binge drinking since 2008 — which constitutes five or more consecutive drinks in one sitting — and 16 percent of district students reported binge drinking in the past 30 days.

U.S. Rep. Sander Levin, D-Michigan, mentioned first being acclimated to student coalitions about 20 years ago, when he politically represented Troy. He mentioned a bipartisan appropriation in Washington, D.C., that offers \$90 million to coalitions, which lasts 10 years.

"The thesis was, if you leave anybody out in terms of the community, you're going to lose," Levin said. "And if you include everybody, there's a chance to win — and win on behalf of our kids."

Alisa Twomey and Michael Valente are juniors at Chippewa Valley and Dakota, respectively, and they answered alcohol-related questions from their peers.

Twomey and Valente both said alcohol is accepted by most teens, with Valente alluding to an attitude that comes from childhood, in which kids see their family members drink at family gatherings and it becomes normalized.

Both acknowledged that alcohol is present at nearly every party, with Twomey saying that students see their classmates regularly bragging about drinking alcohol on social media networks.

"It's probably definitely parents (where teens get their alcohol), because in most cases you hear about parents being the ones letting their kids throw the parties so they don't drive and drink," Twomey said.

The pair of students added that some of their peers tend to mix alcohol use with marijuana and e-cigarettes. Twomey specifically mentioned a brand named Juul, which looks similar to a flash drive and is easy to use in school areas like classrooms and restrooms.

"I would definitely say, as far as alcohol goes, I don't think that peer pressure is so much of a problem," Valente said.

Clinton Township Police Chief Fred Posavetz discussed the different ramifications that teens can suffer from drinking alcohol illegally, which includes possible misdemeanors and fines for underage drinking, to damaging scholastic reputations by possibly being rejected by colleges and universities.

Sometimes, he said, the effects of underage drinking can change the lives of innumerable individuals.

“Aside from the financial consequences of driving a vehicle while intoxicated is the possible psychological effect of having to live with the fact that you, and only you, were responsible for injuring or possibly killing another person,” Posavetz said. “And that’s a guilt that you have to live with for the rest of your life. I guess the question is, is it really, truthfully worth it?”

Macomb County Prosecutor Eric Smith said the message must come from the students, as people are more prone to listen to others their own age.

He said that when growing up, his biggest deterrent to underage drinking was not fines or suspensions or even jail time, but the thought of how his father would react at his actions. After dreams of going to law school, he didn’t want to jeopardize his own career path.

“Can you imagine working hard all those years, and then getting it taken away by one dumb decision?” Smith said. “An alcohol conviction is no way to begin the next phase of your life. The stakes are too high, and they can stop your life before it starts.”

Capt. David Kennedy, of the Macomb County Sheriff’s Office, discussed the legal consequences of serving alcohol to minors. He has teen children and a wife who is a health instructor, and he said the law is plain to see — as are the health effects.

John Myers III, part of the C.J. Barrymore’s executive management team, said that 80 percent of his employees are Chippewa and Dakota students. He said that since C.J. Barrymore’s is a common meeting ground for teens on weekends, employees are taught to have a zero-tolerance policy toward kids who sneak in alcohol or are caught under the influence.

Clinton Township Supervisor Bob Cannon discussed personal stories relating to his children.

He mentioned how his son attended a New Year’s Eve party in high school — a gathering where the parents were present. Cannon noted that the parents collected the kids’ keys and then doled out alcohol. Some kids had an extra set of keys and left the party, luckily to not cause harm to themselves and others.

“If not us, who? It’s us,” Cannon said. “It’s an uphill battle.”

After the event, about three police vehicles transported four students per vehicle to different alcohol retailers in the community to remind them not to sell to underage youth. It was part of the coalition’s Alcohol/Tobacco Retailers Project.

McGunn said an estimated 50 retailers — which included gas stations and party stores — were notified in advance. Students provided educational materials to those running the establishments.