



Measure Aimed at Enablers

By Mary Rae Bragg

By the numbers those respondents, by percentage, who said they have had five or more drinks in a row, as reported in the 2005 Iowa Youth Survey 3 Dubuque County: sixth-graders -- 6; eighth-graders -- 8; eleventh-graders -- 40 3 Delaware County: Sixth-graders -- 1; eighth-graders -- 6; eleventh-graders -- 35 3 Clayton County: Sixth-graders -- 2; eighth-graders -- 12; eleventh-graders -- 32 3 Jackson County: Sixth-graders -- 1; eighth-graders -- 8; eleventh-graders -- 41 3 Jones County: Sixth-graders -- 1; eighth-graders -- 5; eleventh-graders -- 27

Tom Hancock doesn't go out on the calls anymore, but he says he still can hear the parents' screams.

You only have to stand in the hospital and listen to the wailing one time to know that kids and booze are a tragedy waiting to happen, Hancock said.

When he was a volunteer with the Epworth (Iowa) Fire Department, Hancock went to the scene of the misery. Now he is a state senator, and on Monday he joined in unanimously moving along a change in Iowa law that he hopes will save young lives.

Senate File 2343 strengthens current law so that a person no longer has to hand a kid booze to make that person liable for any harm the young drinker may do. Just making it available to them will be enough to break the law.

"Over the years, I've scraped up so many young people," Hancock said. "It was awful easy for me to vote for this regulation."

A study by the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation concluded that in 2005, underage drinkers in Iowa consumed 21.4 percent of all the alcohol sold in the state, totaling \$242 million in sales.

The hope is that by making it easier for victims to sue those who contribute to underage drinking, the enablers will be less likely to shrug off their responsibility to keep youth from imbibing.

That could put a real damper on events such as high school graduation parties where beer kegs have become a staple.

Health experts say those who dismiss underage drinking as typical behavior are ignoring studies that show it to be a dangerous growing trend, leading the National Institutes of Health to declare, "Underage drinking is a leading public health problem in this country."

The Institutes of Health say the average first use of alcohol in 1965 came at age 17 1/2. By 2003, the average age had dropped to 14.

With all the physical, emotional and lifestyle changes going on as children move from adolescence to young adulthood, experts say that just being an adolescent may be a key risk factor not only for beginning to drink but for drinking dangerously.

Hancock said he is aware the rate of underage drinking is even more of a problem in the Dubuque area, where surveys show young people exceed the statewide average.

In 2005, the latest figures available, 22 percent of 11th-grade students nationwide said they engaged in binge drinking in the last 30 days, that is, having five or more drinks in a row. In Iowa, it was 32 percent, and in Dubuque County, 40 percent, nearly twice the national average.

The bill passed by the Iowa Senate Monday went immediately to the House, where it was assigned to the Judiciary Committee.