

# Tighter bans urged on teen drinking

By Sue Ellen Christian

In a celebratory mood, you have a glass of champagne with your 18-year-old son after his high school graduation just before going to bed.

Seems innocent enough to you.

And though it might surprise some, Illinois law allows it: While the statute forbids anyone younger than 21 from drinking, it does make an exception if the drinking occurs under a parent's supervision and in the privacy of one's home.

"I was surprised when I looked that up," said Nancy Sidote Salyers, chief of the municipal division of the Cook County state's attorney's office. "It opened my eyes."

Under an ordinance proposed by a regional prevention group, even such a toast would be prohibited and carry a fine of up to \$500. Because the group believes that such exceptions send mixed messages to teenagers, they want villages to adopt the model ordinance. But some say it goes too far.

Instead of lobbying to change the state law, the Regional Prevention Group, a north and northwest suburban coalition of community leaders involved in alcohol and drug prevention, wants the change in attitude to happen at the grass-roots level. Only then, says the group, will parents and communities send a consistent message to teens.

"It's confusing the way adults serve alcohol to teens in some scenarios but not in others, and then say, 'Don't drink when you go to that party,'" said Kate Mahoney, chairwoman of the group's community action committee.

"Parents serve to a teen and their friends thinking that it is better to have them in their control and under their watch. They are sanctioning it by serving them."

Mahoney's group is asking community organizations to review their village's ordinance regarding underage drinking and ask their village board to adopt

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the more restrictive ordinance.

That ordinance would make it unlawful for parents or any person to serve alcohol to anyone younger than 21 except as part of a religious ceremony.

The model ordinance would fine violators \$500 as well as restitution for any property damage. Some municipalities have ordinances on drinking, though the fines typically are far less than \$500, the group says.

Communities such as Hoffman Estates, Elk Grove Village and Schaumburg have ordinances that permit a minor to drink with the supervision and approval of a parent or a guardian, just like the state law says. The villages adopted local versions of the state law in order to prosecute the violations rather than through the state's attorney's office, said Hoffman Estates Village Atty. Richard Williams.

"The state's attorney's office might not be sensitive to the local needs of the community," Williams said. & cpage

Also, the prevention group wants to target such north and northwest communities that place

the responsibility solely on the parents of a minor, rather than all adults in a community.

Glenview has an ordinance similar to one the group wants passed. The village only allows the consumption of alcohol by a minor during a religious ceremony, said Village Atty. Jeffrey Randall.

"We believe the laws . . . should be the same whether at home or in a public place or purchasing through a liquor store or a bar to really give a clear, concise message to teens that when you're under 21, it is illegal and that it's dangerous and there's a high risk of becoming addicted," Mahoney said. "So [teens] don't feel like they're getting 20 different stories on where to turn."

Schaumburg Mayor Al Larson said that he would review the proposed ordinance and that he is against underage drinking. But Larson and others have questions about the restrictiveness of it.

"If there's a festive occasion at home or somebody has wine at Christmas . . . what do you do, break down the door and arrest them?" Larson asked. "There has to be a little common sense. If you're talking about mixed messages, then parents shouldn't be drinking, either."

Chicago attorney Kenneth Moll,

an expert in dram shop laws, said it could be argued that the model ordinance changes the age at which a person can legally consume liquor. State law prohibits a home-rule community from changing the legal age at which a person may consume liquor.

Under state law, "the legal age for drinking with parental consent is no age at all," Moll said. "Is this ordinance changing that? Yes."

But Heidi Dillon, a member of the prevention group, said a key goal of the group is to spark debate. "The debate is almost as important as whether or not the ordinance is accepted," she said.

There will be a debate, predicts Paul Froehlich, the executive director of the Alliance Against Intoxicated Motorists.

"It would be seen by some people as interfering with the family . . . and tending to make criminals out of parents for what could be fairly innocent behavior," he said.

Though Froehlich said his group had not discussed the model ordinance, he does "sympathize with the prevention group."

"What do we do about mixed messages? It is an excruciating issue of how we teach our young people about this quasi drug, alcohol."