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AREA COMPLIANCE CHECK UNDERSCORES ILLEGALITY OF ALCOHOL/TOBACCO SALES TO MINORS

Painesville, OH — Waging an effective war on underage drinking and tobacco use can be tough. It requires a multi-faceted strategy, plenty of foot-soldiers, careful coordination, and lots of good old fashioned resilience.

The Lake County Alcohol & Other Drug Community Coalition is spearheading local efforts to fight underage drinking and tobacco use. The coalition recently teamed up with the Perry Village Police Department, other local law enforcement officials, and Perry Schools on an initiative designed to draw attention to the fact that selling alcohol or tobacco to minors isn't just wrong — it's illegal. An eastern Lake County compliance check took place in early May. Specially trained teenage volunteers were sent into Perry, Madison, and Painesville area convenience stores, gas stations, and mini-marts to try to purchase alcohol or tobacco products. A plain-clothes police officer was positioned in each of the stores to watch the scenarios play out.

The Alcohol & Other Drug Community Coalition is funded by the Lake County ADAMHS Board, and is headquartered at Crossroads, an agency in the ADAMHS system that focuses on children and family issues. Established by Ohio Statute, the ADAMHS (Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services) Board is responsible for planning, funding and evaluating the area's network of mental health and recovery services.

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During the compliance check, the teens and officers made 44 visits to 25 shops over a four day period. In ten of those 44 visits, the teen was able to purchase tobacco and/or alcohol. That's simply unacceptable according to Coalition Chair Rae Grady of Crossroads. "Access is one of the areas our coalition is very focused on," Grady notes. "When it's relatively easy for kids to get their hands on alcohol and tobacco products, the problem gets worse. So initiatives like this that help tighten or eliminate that access are vital."

The consequences for those who sold to the minors carry both legal and financial weight. Both the stores and the individual sellers will face criminal charges, and will pay fines. Those establishments that sold alcohol to the teen buyers were also reported to the State Liquor Board and Ohio Investigative Unit.

Law enforcement and Perry Schools were important partners in the compliance check initiative, according to Grady. "Lieutenant Michael Shank from the Perry Village Police Department played an especially key role in this effort," she said. "He took care of recruiting and training our teen volunteers, and he coordinated efforts with other area law enforcement departments. We also really appreciated the commitment and enthusiasm of Connie Bowler from the Perry School System."

Grady emphasized that the compliance check was done safely, carefully, and professionally. "It was important to everyone involved that the initiative be conducted fairly — for instance, we didn't set out to recruit kids that looked especially old for their age, we didn't ask the kids to dress in ways that might make them appear older, and we didn't arm them with fake ID's. We also instructed them not to lie — if a clerk asked them their age, they were to given them the honest answer."

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The team also decided to target only establishments that would be safe and legal for teens to be in. “There are other similar initiatives that check compliance in bars, but in this case we focused on mini marts and convenience types of stores,” Grady explained. “In some instances a business landed on our list because the local police had received complaints about underage sales, in others it was just based on our best guess that the store was likely to have heavy teen traffic.”

While it’s natural to be concerned that an illegal sale happened in roughly one-fifth of the compliance check visits, it’s also worth noting that most of the stores passed the test with flying colors. “We applaud those conscientious store owners and employees who take their responsibility seriously when it comes to selling alcohol and tobacco products,” said Grady. “They’re our allies in this important fight, and we appreciate their help.”

The Alcohol and Other Drug Coalition is also ramping up its “Parents Who Host Lose The Most” campaign. “This is designed to remind parents that allowing home-based prom or graduation parties where alcohol may be available to minors is dangerous and illegal,” Grady says. “Underage drinking at parties spawns tragic consequences every year, and we want to send a clear message to parents that they can be subject to both criminal prosecution and civil suits if they allow that to happen at their homes.”

More information on the services provided through the ADAMHS Board and its network of local providers is available at www.HelpThatWorks.us.