



Montgomery County Council

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50 % hike in DWI arrests, 31% of 12th graders binge drink...

COUNCIL REPORT SUGGESTS POSSIBLE IMPROVEMENTS IN DEALING WITH DRUNK DRIVING, UNDERAGE DRINKING

The Montgomery County Council today released a report from its Office of Legislative Oversight that painted a mixed picture of Montgomery County's efforts to curb drunk driving and underage drinking and suggested possible improvements in County and State efforts.

"We are doing a lot, but we need to do more," said Council President Blair Ewing. "Drunk drivers are a menace to themselves and others. Too many of our kids are getting alcohol and abusing it."

The report, the second in a series requested by the Council, reveals that alcohol-related traffic deaths in the County in 1999 accounted for only 24 percent of traffic fatalities. By contrast, 30 percent of traffic fatalities in Maryland and 38 percent nationwide are alcohol-related.

In 1999, law enforcement in the County made more than 4,500 drunk driving arrests – a 50 percent increase over the 3,000 arrests made in 1994.

Still, underage drinking remains a serious problem. Nearly one-third of County 12th graders engaged in binge drinking within 30 days of the date of the survey and binge drinking by 6th graders increased by 163 percent between 1992 and 1998, from 1.1 percent to 2.9 percent.

“The problem of underage drinking just jumps out at you from this report,” said Councilmember Howard Denis. “We can’t be in denial about the extent of the problem.”

In 1999, County law enforcement issued more than 2,400 citations for underage possession of alcohol – a 60 percent increase over the 1997 level. Compliance checks during the 2000 holiday season found licensed establishments selling to underage persons about 25 percent of the time.

“I’m concerned about compliance when people who are underage can so easily have access to alcohol,” said Councilmember Phil Andrews, chair of the Public Safety Committee.

The report identified nine issues for the Council to examine in order to improve the County’s efforts:

1. Coordination of prevention activities pursued by various County agencies.
2. Seeming disparities in compliance rates with minimum age drinking laws, as reported by the Board of License Commissioners and the Police Department.
3. Establishment of a short-term detoxification facility (“drunk tank”).
4. Possible reinstatement of a program that diverts first-time DWIs into treatment.
5. Balance of resources between the State’s Attorney and the Police Department to arrest and prosecute DWIs.
6. Examination of case disposition, sentencing, and recidivism of DWI offenders.
7. Look at effectiveness of the State’s Administrative License Suspension program.
8. Possibility of County seeking State legislation to permit the Motor Vehicle Administration to administratively impose vehicle-based sanction for repeat DWI offenders.
9. Examine the effectiveness of the State’s Drinking Driver Monitor Program, which supervises DWI offenders on probation.

The report will be taken up by a joint meeting of the Health and Human Services Committee and the Public Safety Committee this Thursday, April 5 at 9:30 AM.