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March 30, 2004

**ALCOHOL AWARENESS MONTH: ALCOHOLISM A DISEASE, NOT A RITE OF PASSAGE**

Before another unsuspecting college student dies of alcohol poisoning or yet another high-schooler is killed in an alcohol-related traffic accident, the gravity of underage drinking needs to be brought once more into the spotlight of public awareness, said Ben Brown, deputy commissioner for substance abuse services at the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services.

“Alcohol is the drug most frequently used by American teenagers. It is consumed more frequently than all other illicit drugs combined and is the drug most likely to be associated with injury or death,” he said.

Underage drinking is a critical public health issue in America and represents just the tip of the iceberg. Alcohol is a drug that can affect judgment, coordination and long-term health. In fact, research suggests that early use of alcohol by teenagers may contribute significantly to dependence on alcohol and other drugs later in life, with 40 percent of children who begin using alcohol before the age of 13 becoming alcoholics at some point in their lives, Brown noted.

Yet, there are those who would dismiss underage drinking as a "youthful indiscretion" - a rite of passage from adolescence into adulthood. Many underage drinkers, in fact, are often introduced to alcohol in their own dining rooms, living rooms and kitchens, Brown said.

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"Alcohol use by minors can be a rite of passage - passage for some young people into a lifetime of broken promises, broken families, and broken lives," he said. "Alcohol is not a kid's drink, plain and simple. That's the reason teenage drinking is a violation of the 21 minimum legal drinking age.

"Alcohol is a drug – a powerful, mood-altering drug – and alcoholism is a disease," Brown added. "Over the past two decades, scientific research has revolutionized our understanding of how drugs affect the brain. We now know that prolonged, repeated drug and alcohol use can result in fundamental, long-lasting changes in brain structure and functioning.”

This is one of the reasons preventing underage drinking is so critical, he added. Not only are there a whole set of increased risks in the short-term, including traffic crashes, violent crime, burns, drowning, suicide attempts, fetal alcohol syndrome, alcohol poisonings and high-risk sexual behavior, if an underage drinker is able to make it out of adolescence and into adulthood, the long-term physical and biochemical effects put these drinkers at risk for the rest of their lives.

Unfortunately, binge drinking, the most prevalent form of underage drinking, is as common as it was in the early 1990s, indicating that efforts to combat the phenomenon

have so far failed. According to researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health, 44 percent of U.S. college students engaged in binge drinking and over half the binge drinkers, almost one in four students, were frequent binge drinkers, bingeing three or more times in a two week period.

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"Undoubtedly, many people have seen the footage on television news programs and in print publications: Young men and women literally pouring beer and other alcoholic beverages down their throats without any regard for the tragic consequences that typically follow from this kind of behavior," Brown said. "These students think they're having a great time, being 'grown-up.' Unfortunately, as many as 360,000 of the nation's 12 million undergraduates will ultimately die from alcohol-related causes. This is more than the total number who will be awarded advanced degrees."

While the issue of underage drinking is a complex problem, one which can only be solved through a sustained and cooperative effort between parents, schools, community leaders, and the children themselves, Brown said three areas have proven effective in prevention of underage drinking: curtailing the availability of alcohol; consistent enforcement of existing laws and regulations; and changing norms and behaviors through education. In addition, the alcohol beverage industry has a responsibility to discourage underage drinking and to curtail advertising and marketing that appeals to underage youth.

"As a society, we've got to do a far better job persuading our citizens and our young people that alcohol use is a dead end, that they are playing Russian roulette, not

only with their own lives, but with the lives of friends, neighbors, and loved ones,”

Brown concluded. “Alcoholism is a disease, not a rite of passage.”

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