

## CSM Program Encourages Community Dialog

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Does your teen 'get wasted,' 'binge,' or play drinking games with their friends? Do they think drinking's cool and ok, or are they drinking to combat boredom? According to a 2004 Maryland Adolescent Survey, nearly half of Charles County's high school seniors have used alcohol in the last 30 days. In addition, a 2005 CORE Drug and Alcohol survey, conducted by the College of Southern Maryland, revealed that nearly a third of their students under 21 report they have participated in binge drinking (consuming five or more drinks in a single setting) at least once in the last two weeks.

Underage drinking often establishes a life-long pattern of alcohol use and potential abuse. To combat underage drinking and substance abuse, CSM's Safe Communities Center, in conjunction with the Charles County Substance Abuse Advisory Coalition (CCSAAC), will oversee a drug free communities support program (DFC) funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Association (SAMHSA). The \$100,000 SAMHSA grant will help the DFC develop a community-wide drug awareness campaign, provide information sessions and materials, and increase cooperation between local, state and federal agencies in combating underage drinking and drug abuse in Charles County.

The grant will also provide funding for parent information sessions aimed at dissolving adult perceptions about teen drinking, including such myths as 'drinking is a rite of passage' or 'I did it too and it never hurt me.' According to Linda Smith, CSM's project director of the DFC, "We would like to provide a foundation on which the community and its residents can develop a meaningful dialog about underage drinking and youth substance abuse including what contributes to it, how to decrease its existence, and what strategies can be used to reduce subsequent adult substance."

In a joint statement, the Charles County Commissioners said they are "very pleased to be partners in the drug free communities coalition and look forward to participating in this collaborative effort that will benefit all facets of the Charles County population. It is our sincere hope that our continuing efforts will help prevent and reduce substance abuse in Charles County."

In addition to the Charles County commissioners, the drug free communities CCSAAC is made up of representatives from 12 sectors of the Charles County community including (but not limited to) law enforcement, health department, school, community and civic service group, business, parent and teen representatives. For this year's focus, "The coalition worked to determine how wide-spread the issue of drinking was among teens and then on why teens chose to drink. We know that teens choose to drink when there are not enough social activities to divert their time and efforts; when parent perceptions and expectations facilitate drinking; and when society turns a blind eye and sees the drug use, not as danger or potential addiction, but as a rite of passage," said Smith. "The drug free communities coalition will use the grant to increase awareness of underage drinking in Charles County and work with local, state and federal groups to identify and enhance the information that is already out there about drug abuse.

The coalition will develop partnerships with local community groups to create additional drug avoidance activities such as youth dances, parties and networking opportunities, and will provide Charles County with an additional resource for drug awareness education and prevention materials," said Smith. Previous drug awareness programs have been presented as part of Project Graduation and at school transition dinners held for parents.

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