

PORTSMOUTH

Chief sounds alarm on city alcohol abuse

Teens taken into custody rises rapidly

BY SHIR HABERMAN
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PORTSMOUTH — While Portsmouth is often cited as one of America's safest cities, Police Chief Michael Magnant said he is alarmed by the rising number of arrests of teens and adults for alcohol-related crimes.

"Alcohol and drugs continue to be major themes behind a lot of what we do," Magnant told the Chamber of Commerce's State of the City breakfast crowd on Wednesday. "In 2007, we made 1,599 arrests (and) one-third of them involved alcohol."

The chief said the number of people taken into protective custody for alcohol or drug intoxication was up 12 percent, and drug and narcotics cases rose 7 percent in 2007 in Portsmouth, named one of the top places to live and among America's safest cities by Money Magazine in 1997 and 2000.

"We've removed cocaine, crack cocaine, meth, marijuana and illegal prescription drugs from our streets," Magnant said. "In 2007, we investigated three drug-related overdose deaths."

The chief said that many of the property thefts reported to his department are the result of people trying to support their addictions. He also expressed concerns about the rise in the use of alcohol among teens.



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Portsmouth City Manager John Bohenko told members of the Greater Portsmouth Chamber of Commerce Wednesday morning that the city is committed to exploring the creation of more work force housing.

"As a cop, as a parent, as a community member, I am very concerned about the increased level of teen alcohol use we are seeing," Magnant told the audience. "In 2002, we arrested 16 teens for (alcohol) possession. In 2003 and 2004, it was 20.

"In 2005, it was 58; in 2006 it was 70; and in 2007, it was over 100," the chief said.

Part of the problem, the chief said, was that Portsmouth has the highest concentration of alcohol sales outlets, per capita, of any city or town in the state. Research, he said, shows that the higher the density of alcohol sales outlets, the higher the crime and disorder.

This high density is complicated by the willingness of clerks in these outlets to sell to minors, said Magnant.

"Although we have regularly conducted alcohol compliance checks since 2002, we consistently see one out of five clerks sell to underage buyers," he said. "Last year, we responded to 19 underage alcohol parties and took over 100 teens into protective custody."

A recent Youth Risk Behavior Analysis conducted in the Portsmouth schools showed 33 percent of high school students reported binge drinking within the last month, and 48 percent admitted to using alcohol

within that same period.

Magnant pointed to the June 2007 death of 20-year-old Portsmouth High School graduate Jhaime Dye as a tragic example of the potential result of alcohol use. When Dye crashed his car in Rye, his blood alcohol level was .07, well above the level allowed for those under the legal drinking age, he said.

"I know the schools and the police are doing the best we can, but something's missing from the equation," Magnant said. "I hope we find it and have the courage to act on it before we lose another Jhaime Dye."

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Rate of teens in custody rises rapidly

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