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Teen booze program a great way to educate

With more than 90 bars and restaurants that serve alcohol, Portsmouth has the most per capita in the state.

And with bigger numbers come bigger problems.

That's the reason police and Chief Michael Magnant have been so pro-active with drunken-driving patrols and other innovative measures to prevent adults from abusing alcohol.

Now they have taken steps to address underage drinking in a new and different manner. And at first glance, it appears to be well conceived and offers an alternative to a simple \$350 fine.

Police and the courts are attempting to teach teens there are consequences to breaking the law besides having to write out a check.

They are offering plea deals to the charge of being a minor in possession of alcohol, and if the teen meets the commitments of the agreement, the charge will go away after a year.

The program, which started this week, requires the teen to enroll in an alcohol awareness program — Alcohol Safety Action Project of Dover — that consists of 12 hours of participation during three weekends and costs \$300. So they're still writing a check, but there is a considerable education aspect to this alternative. And that's good.

It is also good that kids who make mistakes and get caught won't have their futures jeopardized by a conviction that could affect things such as college scholarships and financial aid.

But irresponsibility will be punished. The court can reinstate a charge for a teen who fails to live up to the agreement.

The need for such a program has become apparent in the city.

Last year, Magnant told a Chamber of Commerce breakfast group he was concerned about a rise in teenage-drinking arrests.

He said the number of arrests in the city for minors in possession of alcohol was 16 in 2002. There has been a marked increase in that number every year since, with the total being more than 100 for last year.

He told the audience a Youth Risk Behavior Analysis conducted in Portsmouth 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.

In August, Magnant received a national award for his efforts toward preventing underage alcohol use.

This new program is the result of meetings of concerned parents, school officials and police. It is a good alternative to a simple fine and criminal record.

And, while the teen might at first think of the alcohol classes as a punishment, education benefits everyone.

In his address to the chamber, Magnant referred to the death of 20-year-old Portsmouth High School graduate Jhaime Dye, who was killed in a Rye car crash in June 2007. He had been drinking, according to police.

"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."

This new program could be a good start.