

OPINION COLUMNISTS

David Rodriguez and Jenna Shankman: Community combats underage drinking

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On March 21, 130 youth, parents, and community members in Watsonville gathered at Watsonville High School engaged and ready to take action. Why? Because alcohol is still the number one substance used by Watsonville teens, and is causing harm to our community. Because underage drinking impacts brain development and health and increases risky behavior and likelihood of addiction. Watsonville showed up because our community wants to see young people healthy and successful in school and beyond.

Underage drinking cost the residents of California \$6.7 billion in 2013. This cost includes: medical care, work loss, criminal justice fees, property damage, youth violence, and traffic accidents. Although we've made great strides in the Pajaro Valley with a 9 percent decline in 11th-grader self-reported binge drinking rates over a two year period, we are still seeing and hearing that alcohol is easy to obtain (67 percent of 11th-graders say it is very or fairly easy) and is leading to harmful consequences. These include drinking and driving, blacking out, fights, alcohol poisoning and unwanted sex.

The focus of the March Town Hall was on individual, community, and policy solutions.

Community members explored how to address the issues surrounding underage drinking in the community, at schools and in the home. Attendees were encouraged to utilize the social host ordinance and develop family policies to deter in-home drinking and parties. Social host ordinances, which the city of Watsonville adopted in 2006, deter underage drinking at parties by holding adult providers accountable with non-criminal citations and fines. The community also discussed the role of alcohol outlets in underage alcohol access, as well as the relationship between high outlet numbers and neighborhood violence. The group recognized that there are many exemplary and responsible alcohol merchants in Watsonville but also recognized that we need stronger mechanisms to address those that do not hold the community's wellbeing as a top priority. School officials and school counselors discussed how students can receive support through programs such as Seven Challenges.

One young community member at the Town Hall shared: "I've been in Seven Challenges for the last nine months and even though I'm not doing everything my parents would like me to do, my use has decreased and I think Seven Challenges has

saved my life.” From 2013-15, 45.3 percent of Seven Challenges participants in the Pajaro Valley Unified School District were actually self-referred.

All community members present had an opportunity to commit to taking action to reduce alcohol consumption. “When an entire community works collectively and takes action to improve health outcomes for our youth, we all win. The intersectoral collaboration demonstrated on this issue is a testament of our collective commitment to all youth and families of the Pajaro Valley,” said Erica Padilla-Chavez, CEO of PVPSA and Town Hall keynote.

Moving forward, Community Prevention Partners will continue to work together in partnership with the community to increase public health and safety and address issues that undermine the strength of this beautiful place that we love to call home.

The Town Hall was Organized by Santa Cruz County Community Prevention Partners (CPP) in partnership with Watsonville Police Department, Pajaro Valley Prevention and Student Assistance, PVUSD, Watsonville High School, Friday Night Live, Youth Violence Prevention Taskforce, United Way, Santa Cruz County Health Services Administration, Pajaro Valley Community Health Trust, Community Action Board, Watsonville YWCA, Youth N.O.W. and Watsonville Parks and Community Services Department. CPP is a multi-sector county-wide drug and alcohol prevention coalition dedicated to building a diverse community that promotes health and well-being, and enhances youth and community safety through sustainable alcohol and drug prevention efforts. For more information on CPP, please visit: www.facebook.com/SantaCruzCPP or call 831-454-5003.

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