Teen drinking a key focus of Governor's Alcohol Awareness Month decree

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Alcohol abuse and underage drinking continue to plague Oregon, and the health and social consequences are serious, sometimes fatal, according to the Oregon Department of Human Services Addictions and Mental Health Division. Drinking starts young in this state. Thirty-one percent of Oregon's eighth graders and half the 11th graders reported regular alcohol use last year, approximately 38,000 youngsters have a serious alcohol problem, and it's the leading cause of death among youth here. That's why Gov. Ted Kulongoski has proclaimed April as Alcohol Awareness Month in Oregon. As noted in the proclamation, alcohol contributes to adolescent motor vehicle crashes, traumatic injuries, poor school performance, and health and safety problems. Research shows that the younger individuals are when they start to drink, the more likely they are to become alcoholic. And alcohol, not methamphetamine or marijuana, is the most frequently used drug among Oregon high school students. Alcohol causes big problems for adults too, according to DHS statistics. In Oregon, approximately 66 percent of men and 50 percent of women drink. Nearly six percent of older adults and 20 percent of 18- to 25-year-olds abuse or are dependent on alcohol and need treatment. Each year there are more than 1,000 alcohol-related deaths in Oregon. About one-third of all motor vehicle fatalities involve alcohol. "Alcohol Awareness Month is a great opportunity to get people involved in solving some of the problems associated with drinking," said Rick Cady, prevention manager of DHS' Addictions and Mental Health Division. "April is just a starting point. Underage drinking and alcohol abuse have such life-shattering consequences that we must be vigilant about it year around." Cady recently joined DHS in the newly created position and is nationally recognized for his leadership and consultation work in the field of alcohol and drug abuse prevention. Cady said DHS works with the Governor's Council on Drug and Alcohol Abuse Programs, the Oregon Department of Transportation, Oregon Liquor Control Commission, Oregon Partnership, and other groups and community providers to broaden its alcohol prevention outreach mission. One new partner in the fight against underage drinking is the Statewide Leadership Team for Alcohol-Free Kids, chaired by Oregon Sen. Laurie Monnes Anderson (D-Gresham). The Governor called for creation of the team to develop a wide-ranging set of youth alcohol prevention strategies, recommendations, and a five-year action plan for consideration by the 2009 Legislature. Areas of focus are: â€¢ Strengthening community mobilization and leadership; â€¢ Implementing research-based school and family prevention curricula; â€¢ Enhancing support for enforcement and adjudication efforts; â€¢ Creating targeted and consistent statewide public education efforts; and â€¢ Improving data collection to monitor programs and inform policy decisions. Underage drinking must be addressed on "multiple fronts with multiple strategies," with collaboration among state and local agencies, community partners, researchers, health care entities, business leaders and elected officials. And all segments of the public must be willing to adopt recommendations for change to occur, said the Governor in calling for the Alcohol-Free Kids team. "I'm excited about the work of this leadership team, because we're looking at solving underage drinking problems in a multi-disciplinary way," said Monnes Anderson. "If changes in laws are needed, then we'll propose legislation. We can work with police and courts on enforcement and judicial issues, or if a treatment option is needed, then we'll go for that. We're bringing a lot of different partners to the table." Cady said it will take the support of all Oregonians to cut the underage drinking rate, especially the support of parents, who are the critical "ounce of prevention." "Parents play a stronger role than they might think in influencing their kids not to drink," said Cady. "Parents must talk about the issue, set some boundaries and get kids thinking about alcohol's consequences. And all of us, really, should be concerned about those consequences."