

# Washington Post Alexandria-Arlington Extra

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Front page picture of Coalition Members in front of City Hall, with headline:

## For Grown-Ups, A Sober Message

After more teen deaths from drinking and driving, Alexandrians forge a coalition to stop the acquisition of liquor by minors. Their target: adult enablers.

### Underage Drinkers? Just Say Stop.

Coalition Will Target Enablers With 'Sticker Shock' Campaign

By Jerry Markon  
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Later this month, teams of Alexandria high school students and parents will fan out across the city to dissuade adults from buying alcohol for minors.

They will do it with a stop sign.

Marching into about 50 participating grocery stores and other retailers, the crusaders will affix red stop sign-like stickers to thousands of packages of beer, wine coolers and other alcoholic beverages, warning that anyone 21 or older who buys or provides alcohol for minors faces up to a year in jail.

"Prevent underage drinking!" the stickers urge.

The exercise, known as "sticker shock" and run by the Virginia Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control, is the kickoff event for a task force that is taking an aggressive approach to curbing illicit drinking and drug use among Alexandria teens.

As the school year gets underway, the Substance Abuse Prevention Coalition of Alexandria hopes to convince students, parents and school officials that drinking and drug use among teenagers can only cause harm.

"Our message is delay, delay, delay," said Cate Alexander-Brennan, the task force's chairwoman and mother of a T.C. Williams High School senior. "Delay the onset of drinking until the legal age and completely avoid the use of illegal drugs. There is no data to support that responsible drinking by teens is even possible given their level of maturity."

The coalition will be officially launched Sept. 29, when Mayor William D. Euille (D), the honorary chairman, will host a brief ceremony in Old Town. But the about 30 members of the coalition already are trying to get parents to face some hard truths.

Alexander-Brennan said her initial research shows that Alexandria parents often provide the alcohol for parties and rituals such as the "beach week" trips. "These are booze-sodden activities. These are parent-sponsored activities, and the parents are supplying the alcohol," she said. "That was astounding to me. Many parents think there is no way to stop it, that there is nothing to do about teen drinking except condone it and try to manage it."

Amina Uwwais, a T.C. Williams junior and cheerleader who works with the coalition, said parents not only are supplying the alcohol, "they are drinking with their kids, at home, at parties or outside. The kids are, like, 'Can I try it?' " and the parents are, like, 'There's nothing wrong with that.' "

Alexander-Brennan also is taking on the school system, saying it offers no substance-abuse curriculum or awareness activities during the school day after ninth grade. "We hope to see progress in that area," she said. "I don't think this is all the schools' responsibility -- it's a community responsibility -- but the schools are an important part because the law requires kids to go to school. That's about the only place you know you're going to find them."

Alexander-Brennan added that the school system, which has several members on the coalition, has been "very responsive."

Margaret Walsh, executive director of secondary programs for Alexandria public schools, said she is "thrilled with the energy around the coalition. They're trying to develop a sense of urgency, and that's appropriate."

But Walsh questioned whether there is time in the school day to add substance-abuse programs. She said Alexandria exceeds state education standards by requiring students to learn about substance abuse in a human growth and development class, along with a mandatory health course.

Although the human growth class was designed for ninth-graders, some students take it in grades 10-12.

"I don't want to appear frustrated with the concern," Walsh said. "I just don't think that we can require more of the kids during school time. The issue is not what they're learning from 8 to 3:30; it's what they're doing beyond those times."

Although the extent of drinking and drug use by the city's teens is unclear, the best available statistics come from a 2006 survey of Alexandria teens by an independent firm. The survey found that 46 percent of seventh- through 12th-graders reported drinking alcohol in the previous 12 months; 25 percent of seniors admitted to "binge drinking" in

the previous 30 days. Binge drinking was defined as having five or more drinks in a row, one or more times in the previous two weeks.

School administrators and task force members agree that although teen substance abuse is a problem, it is apparently no worse locally than it is nationally. However, recent fatal accidents involving teenagers and drugs and alcohol have focused attention on the issue.

Last month, The Washington Post reported that a George Mason University student had a blood alcohol level of .14 when she drove her convertible into the path of a tractor-trailer on a Capital Beltway ramp in June, killing herself and three friends. In Virginia, a driver younger than 21 with a blood alcohol level of .02 is considered to be driving under the influence. Elaine M. Thackston, 20, had been convicted of drinking and driving a year earlier, according to court documents. Police said they found an open, half-empty gallon bottle of vodka, a six-pack of beer and a small amount of marijuana in the car.

But some task force members said the grief triggered by such accidents will not necessarily change behavior.

"I think what happens when you hear these horrible stories is everyone gasps, but it doesn't have a long-term impact except possibly on those who were close to the people who died," said Deborah Warren, director of child, family and prevention services for the Alexandria Community Services Board.

"It kind of fades," she said. "Everyone will say we have to do something about this, but research shows we need a long-term strategy to address the problem of underage drinking."

The coalition, which includes students, parents, prosecutors and hospital staff members, is trying to develop such a strategy. The coalition emerged from a 2005 health assessment published by the Alexandria Health Department, which declared mental health and substance abuse a community priority. That led to the formation of the Partnership for a Healthier Alexandria, which formed the coalition over the past few months.

The coalition has no full-time staff or budget, but it is applying for federal and state grants. Its approach and mission have not been finalized, but Alexander-Brennan said the emphasis likely will be on educating teens and parents about the physical, emotional and legal aspects of underage substance abuse. "We're still refining our goals," she said. "We have a lot of work to do on message."

In the meantime, the coalition decided that the sticker shock project was a good way to gain the attention of adults. The program has been tried in at least three other Northern Virginia communities: Manassas and Fairfax and Prince William counties. In Alexandria, five teams -- each with three teens and one adult -- will affix stickers to any alcohol product that has cardboard packaging at designated stores, including Giant supermarkets, 7-Elevens and CVS pharmacies.

The activity "is a very good start," said Uwwais of T.C. Williams.

"If parents see a sticker saying that providing alcohol for teens is against the law, maybe they will wake up," she said. "And it will be a way to let store owners know they shouldn't be selling to underage drinkers, because there will be repercussions."