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CONTACT: Donnis Reese

248-802-6789

donnis@achconline.org

**COMMUNITY COALITIONS COLLABORATE
TO REDUCE UNDERAGE DRINKING IN OAKLAND COUNTY**

Community coalitions across Oakland County are beginning their underage drinking prevention campaign. As members of the Alliance of Coalitions for Healthy Communities (ACHC), they have shared local data, studied county-wide reports and reviewed national strategies. Then they collaborated to develop their vision of reducing underage drinking in their communities and implementation of their objectives. “We live in communities where too many youth experience the harmful consequences of underage drinking” said Theresa Mungoli, President of ACHC, “and we’re committed to reduce that number.”

According to student reports in 2005, the percentage of twelfth grade youth in Oakland County who drank in the past month is larger than the national average. Local youth experience easy access to alcohol: 95.2% of twelfth grade students say alcohol is fairly easy or very easy to get. Youth report that they most frequently get alcohol from their own homes, parties or a friend’s house.

In addition, coalition leaders are very concerned that youth don’t realize the harmful consequences of drinking alcohol. Over 34% of 12th grade students reported drinking five or more drinks in a row in the two weeks before the survey, and only 54.4% of all 12th grade students perceived such large amounts of alcohol to cause great harm or risk. “We haven’t communicated the short-term and long-term harmful consequences of underage drinking,” stated Donnis Reese, Executive Director of ACHC. “We need to increase awareness of the real physical and legal harm, and change our environment so it’s easier for youth to make healthy decisions.”

ACHC Member Coalitions have three goals for the underage drinking prevention campaign:

1. Reduce youth access to alcohol.

All coalitions will collaborate with local police departments to communicate the legal consequences of providing alcohol to minors. Local police departments will be encouraged to enforce the ordinances of their communities, and citizens are encouraged to report suspected problems.

Several coalitions will publicize the legal consequences of providing alcohol to youth by reminding citizens that “Parents Who Host Lost the Most. Don’t Be a Party to Underage Drinking.” Some coalitions will implement “Sticker Shock” a campaign in cooperation with local retail alcohol outlets to place warning labels on packaged alcohol. The stickers remind buyers that “Providing Alcohol to Minors is ILLEGAL.”

2. Increase awareness of harmful consequences of underage drinking.

High levels of drinking among teens are troubling because medical research shows that the adolescent brain is still developing. Alcohol impacts brain function and behavior differently during adolescence than during adulthood. Recent data suggests that teens may be more vulnerable than adults to impairment following repeated alcohol use. These warnings come from tests in which adolescent drinkers scored worse than non-users on vocabulary, general information, memory and memory retrieval. Adolescent drinkers perform worse in school, and have an increased risk of social problems, depression, suicidal thoughts and violence. Young people who begin drinking before the age of 15 are four times more likely to develop alcoholism than those who begin drinking at age 21 or later.

Local coalitions are seeking partnership with health care professionals to educate citizens about the real physical harm associated with underage drinking. Dr. Michael Zielinski, Medical Director of the Waterford Ambulatory Care Center tells parents, “If you still think alcohol is harmless and won’t hurt your child, spend a night in the E.R. of any hospital. I am sure you will change your mind quickly when you witness the end result of teens ‘drinking just a few beers.’”

3. Increase parent knowledge of prevention strategies.

Parents want to protect their children from the harmful consequences of underage drinking. The ACHC 2006 Parent Survey showed that 97% of parents have talked to their children about alcohol use. “We need to help parents to arm themselves with the tools needed to be more effective in setting guidelines for their children. We also need to be good neighbors and watch out for each other’s children. Local resources and support through community coalitions can help,” reported Donna Schaerer, Chair of the ACHC Underage Drinking Prevention Committee.

To help parents be more effective, the coalitions have published, in partnership with Comcast, a brochure, “Family Guide to Teen Parties.” The guidelines come from a publication provided by the Royal Oak Community Coalition. These suggestions give parents a checklist for ways to keep their children protected from access to alcohol and create a “safety net” their children can use to make good choices. Based on the ACHC 2006 Parent Survey, coalition leaders know that parents want to partner with other parents in protecting their children. The Family Guide helps parents to communicate and support one another.

ACHC coalitions are also encouraging parents to “Start Talking Before They Start Drinking.” Oakland County youth most often start drinking at times of transition such as entering a new school. Developing a strong parent-child relationship before entering middle school and high school will help youth talk to their parents during these stressful times.

Parents, youth and other residents may call ACHC 248-802-6789 or visit the website, www.achconline.org for more information.