

Hotels Stung by Underage Drinking Crackdown

By Veronica T. Jennings May 8, 1994

In an unusual sting operation designed to combat underage drinking, Montgomery County officials have cited 14 hotels and food businesses for delivering alcohol to minors in hotel rooms. Liquor inspectors and young volunteers have been methodically conducting stings since January at most of the county's 25 major hotels, a new wrinkle in the endless battle against teenage drinking. Law enforcement agencies throughout the area are trying new methods or expanding their use of old ones to make it harder for teenagers to obtain alcohol -- especially now that the season of proms and graduations has begun for more than 125 Washington area high schools. Police agencies recently began using sobriety checkpoints, and about 200 police officers and liquor inspectors will participate in the privately funded "Cops in Shops" program designed to catch people using false identification to buy alcohol in stores. Montgomery officials say that although high school students' booking of hotel rooms for parties is most widespread during prom and graduation season, the practice actually is a year-round problem that must be addressed.

Montgomery's crackdown may be the first of its kind in the nation, said Dennis Theohardis, administrator of the county's

Board of License Commissioners and president of the National Liquor Law Enforcement Association. In the last three months, nine of 14 hotels set up in the sting operation sold alcohol to minors who ordered it from room service, said Ron Price, chief inspector for the county liquor board. Montgomery has 25 hotels licensed to sell alcoholic beverages to guests. County officials also charged four restaurants and one beer and wine dealer with delivering alcohol to minors at hotel rooms, Price said. In all cases, the room-service or outside delivery person failed to check for the proper identification of the room's occupant. The legal age to buy or consume alcohol is 21. "It is a serious concern to us," Price said. "If they maintain this kind of track record in the off-season, what will happen in prom season?" "The numbers have been very disappointing," Theohardis said, especially as the metropolitan area embarks on its most expansive crackdown in recent years. Area law enforcement agencies, liquor licensing boards and community and business organizations are working together to combat teenage drinking. "We are trying to look at it from a regional perspective ... to raise the expectations of young people of being stopped around prom time," said Robert E. Langston, chief of the U.S. Park Police and chairman of the Police Chiefs Committee for the Washington Council of Governments. In Montgomery, police also will attend after-prom parties at schools and private homes, and county liquor inspectors will operate a "party-buster" tip line to report unchaperoned teenage parties where alcohol is used, officials said. Price said the hotel sting operation illustrates the hurdles faced by law enforcement agencies. "The problem is as old as dirt," he said. "Frankly, we

can't stop (underage drinking) permanently, but we can't sit back and be idle either. We want to send a clear message that if you're caught in our jurisdiction, you will pay the penalty." He said that although hotel managers have tried to train their staffs to obey the law, employee performance is often "pitiful." About 30 hotels, motels and limousine companies in Montgomery County signed pledges last month to report teenagers who rent rooms for illegal parties or who smuggle alcohol into limousines or hotel rooms. Hotel managers and liquor retailers said they have trained employees to require proof of age when delivering alcohol to rooms. At the Marriott Suites in Bethesda, hotel employees flag reservations made by students attending proms at the facility and require them to sign statements banning parties in the rooms, said general manager Hunter Hansen. His hotel was cited last week, but Hansen said the violation occurred when the delivery was made by a new employee unfamiliar with hotel procedures. "The difficulty is that anyone can call from a room, and that person may be of age, but a minor also could be in the room," said Evangeline Lailas, catering manager for the Sheraton Potomac Inn in Rockville, which was cited last month for selling alcohol to a minor. "We instruct our drivers to card anybody," said Sonny Pollet, manager of Harry's Leaning Tower of Pizza in Gaithersburg. "To me and other owners, it's a form of entrapment for the county to send people around in sting operations." Thursday, the Montgomery liquor board fined Pollet's store \$ 2,500 for delivering a case of beer to a minor at a room in the Holiday Inn in Gaithersburg. The hotel was separately fined \$ 3,000 for selling alcohol to minors through its room service, Price said. A

Holiday Inn manager who declined to give her name said that no one younger than 21 will be allowed to rent a room at the hotel and that staff members have been trained to watch for violations. The Clarion Hotel in Rockville was fined \$ 1,000. The other cited businesses have not had their cases adjudicated. The fine for first-time offenders usually is \$ 1,000, but the county liquor board can impose fines of up to \$ 20,000 and order suspensions or revocations of licenses, Price said. The Washington Post contacted several other Montgomery hotels and alcohol sellers charged in the crackdown, but most would not comment or did not return calls. Theohardis said compliance with alcohol sales law has improved. During sting operations in 1992, 50 percent of retail stores were caught selling to minors, he said. Theohardis said that more recent sweeps found that only 26 percent of retail stores were selling alcohol to minors. Police and community officials said increased publicity and tougher enforcement are making a dent in the underage drinking problem. "For every person that is caught, thousands of others may change their behavior," said Montgomery County Council member Gail Ewing (D-At Large), who helped launch the "Draw the Line" teenage alcohol prevention program two years ago. In the last several years, "there have been no alcohol-related deaths or injuries during prom season," said Fairfax Police Capt. Justin Murphy. "We're leaving an impression on teenagers," he said. At a sobriety checkpoint near the Damascus High School prom Friday night, Montgomery police stopped nearly 500 cars and limousines. They made five alcohol-related arrests, but all were adults, said Sgt. Thomas Didone. "We're going to do more of these this

prom season," he said. Price said authorities are finding it harder to catch teenagers in stores. "Two years ago, it was so much easier to find kids attempting to purchase alcohol," he said. "Now, we check a lot of IDs every weekend, hundreds of them, and it's not easy pickings anymore." Chris, a student at Winston Churchill High School in Potomac, said he doesn't care about alcohol-free post-prom parties or police crackdowns or parental warnings. He said his upcoming prom and graduation mean one thing: a good excuse to drink. But he doesn't need much of an excuse -- Chris said he drinks four or five times a week. And he doesn't think parents or police should worry. "They need to back off," said Chris, adding that he usually gets together with a half-dozen friends in someone's basement to drink. "As long as I'm not drinking and driving, there's no problem with it." Such attitudes add up to a major headache for authorities. Mike, another Churchill student, captured the difficulty of the challenge. "The harder the police try to stop us," Mike said, "the harder we work to out-strategize them." Staff writers Stephen Buckley and Graciela Sevilla contributed to this report.