

# New social host law to hold adults accountable for underage drinking

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The "social host" law went into effect Friday, making adults liable for knowingly allowing underage drinking on their property. A violation would be a misdemeanor, punishable by a \$1,000 fine and/or 90 days in jail.

A new Mississippi law will crash drinking parties hosted by parents for teenagers.

On Friday, the "social host" law went into effect, making adults liable for knowingly allowing underage drinking (people younger than 21) on their property. A violation would be a misdemeanor, punishable by a \$1,000 fine and/or 90 days in jail.

"We have parents and adults who make the statement, 'It's okay if they (youth) drink at home; it's safe, I'm there.' We have reported incidences of alcohol poisonings right there in the home," said LaTonya Horne-Cook, SPFSIG (Strategic Prevention Framework State Incentive Grant) director for Weems Mental Health Center.

Horne-Cooke is affiliated with the Mississippians Advocating Against Underage Drinking (MAAUD), which was among coalitions of parents and health advocates who supported the bill that, after two fails, passed the House and Senate without opposition this past legislative session.

Adults aren't the only ones who may face punishment if the law is violated.

A person under the age of 21 who purchases or possesses alcohol could be fined up to \$500 and sentenced to up to 30 days of community service, Horne-Cook said. Additionally, if they present law enforcement a false document stating they are 21 years or older, they, too, can be found guilty of the social host law and fined for up to \$500 and sentenced to up to 30 days of community service.

Underage drinking is a problem statewide. According to Horne-Cooke, millions of dollars are spent for prevention, intervention and treatment. And Lauderdale County is ranked third in the state for underage drinking DUIs.

The social host law is not limited to underage drinking in the home, but also gatherings such as pasture parties, bon fires and on private properties such as camps or lake houses. While the law is not expected to put an end to underage drinking, proponents say it will be a deterrent. Most importantly, it will hold adults and parents who host drinking parties for teens – or allow them to drink at home – accountable.

"Adults have to be more responsible as far as or youth acquiring alcohol," said Pam Vance, president of the Lauderdale County chapter of Mothers Against Drunk Drivers.

"With the social host law, adults will be more responsible with pasture parties or if something is going on their property. Whether they know about it (underage drinking) or not, they will be held responsible," Vance said.

Local law enforcement agrees that accountability is the most important aspect of the law.

"I think that accountability is a wonderful thing," Meridian Police Chief Lee Shelbourn said.

"This will be another tool in our toolbox for when we have situations where we have these type of gatherings," said Chief Deputy Ward Calhoun of the Lauderdale County Sheriff Department. "Now when deputies arrive on the scene, there is a charge for adults who host these events."

Realistically, law enforcement can't know about every party or bon fire where underage drinking is taking place.

"Typically, we will get a call from someone saying there's a lot of cars parked at a house or on private property and teenagers are being loud and unruly or stumbling," Calhoun said.

"If adults are having a gathering of young people at their residence, they need to be actively involved in what's going on their property. And they need to monitor those young people to make sure they are not doing anything to get the young people in trouble, or themselves in trouble," he said.

Additional information about the Social Host Law can be found online by searching Mississippi Code of 1972 Annotated in Google.

## What's the big deal?

- Alcohol kills more teens than all other illegal drugs combined.
- Teens who begin drinking before age 15 have a 40 percent higher chance of becoming alcohol dependent than those who wait to 21 to begin drinking.
- Teens who drink regularly can shrink the part of the brain that controls learning, memory and decision-making. An adolescent's brain is still developing and is especially sensitive to alcohol and drugs.
- According to a recent Monitoring the Future survey, nearly 1 out of 5 10th graders and 1 out of 4 12th graders had engaged in binge drinking at least once in the previous two weeks.
- A 2009 national CASA (Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse) teen survey found that 1 out of 3 teen drinkers usually drink with the intent to get drunk, and teens that get drunk are 18 times likelier to have used marijuana.
- Women absorb alcohol faster than men, so it takes less for them to become intoxicated.
- Teens who drink are more likely to get poor grades, drop out of school, have unplanned and unprotected sex, and be a victim of car crashes, date rape, alcohol poisoning or suicide.
- According to a recent study, an estimated 29 percent of high school students rode in a car with a drunk driver in the last month.
- An alcohol conviction can limit a teen's scholarship opportunities and future career choices. Many careers require a license to practice, which may be denied.