



Leaders discuss underage drinking issue

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By **LINDSAY MOTT** The Mississippi Press

GAUTIER -- Community leaders said underage drinking in Jackson County is on the decline and they discussed ways to continue that trend during a town hall meeting conducted by Sing-ing River Mental Health Services at the Gautier Convention Center.

Four panelists spoke at the meetings -- Ken Broadus, head of the Jackson County Sheriff's Department's underage drinking task force; Jamie Cox and Stephanie Dukes from the Youth Drug Court Program; and James Yancey, director of the Jackson County Community Services Coalition (JCCSC).

Joseph Stallworth, alcohol and drug program director with Singing River Services, said the main goal of the town hall meeting was "primarily to bring the community together with law enforcement, educators and parents, and form a committee, so we can move on with solutions and programs."

The group wants to be able to prevent underage drinking, he said.

According to statistics provided by Yancey, underage drinking has dropped in Jackson County since 2002. He said his group surveyed 6,000 sixth- and seventh-grade students from all four school districts in 2002. Of those students, 21 percent of sixth-graders and 32 percent of seventh-graders had sampled alcohol in the previous 30 days.

In a recent survey of 2000 students from three school districts, 17 percent of sixth- graders and 24 percent of seventh-graders had consumed alcohol in the previous 30 days.

Yancey credited Project Northfield, which the JCCSC takes into schools and teaches students the dangers of underage drinking, as lowering these numbers. The project started in 2002.

He added that national figures reveal that 70 percent of underage students do not drink, compared to 76-83 percent in Jackson County.

According to Broadus, kids buying and drinking alcohol underage is still "prevalent."

He said he will often find 40 people under the drinking age at a party and a "significant" number are drinking. He said for prevention of underage drinking, there needs to be "the fear factor."

"They have to know that if they get in trouble, they're in trouble," Broadus said.

Cox, who is the coordinator of the Youth Drug Court, gave details on the program, which deals with students that have already come through the juvenile court for alcohol or drug-related incidents.

It is an "intensive program," she said, that lasts a minimum of eight months and provides counseling, accountability in school, punishment for those not following the program and

rewards to those who are succeeding.

The goal of the program is to give the students "the basic tools they need to be more productive without drugs and alcohol," Cox said.

Dukes, a case manager with the Youth Drug Court, discussed Project Save a Child at the meeting. This program is a "pro-active" program trying to reach children who show behavioral problems by teaching them morals and respect, she said.

"If you wait until they're 11, it's too late." Dukes said. "You save a child, you save the community."

Stallworth said preventing underage drinking requires "parental attitudes" to change.

"That seems to be the key," he said. "When parents get involved, they press their children. They back them up and they have consequences for their behavior."

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