

Funding at risk for program that equips parents to combat underage drinking

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SALT LAKE CITY — Research shows that parents are the No. 1 influence in keeping their kids away from alcohol, which is why public health professionals in Utah are reeling after hearing that funding for their nationally recognized educational campaign, "Parents Empowered," is potentially on the chopping block.

"We're really taken aback," said Doug Murakami, director of alcohol education for the Utah Department of

Alcoholic Beverage Control. "We know what we're doing, we're square over the target of parents."

In a meeting this past week at the Capitol, members of the Business Economic Development and Labor Appropriations Subcommittee said they had received a budget recommendation that perhaps the campaign was redundant.

They pointed to the 2016 bill, HB442, which loosened some alcohol restrictions in the state but provided \$1.75 million for yearly alcohol prevention education of eighth- and 10th-graders. Parents Empowered's \$2.3 million budget is tied to alcohol sales and revenue.

"The question we're trying to answer is, are we redundantly running two things," said committee co-chairman, Sen. Dan Hemmert, R-Orem. "(We want to) do the best thing with the dollars we have and are the dollars best spent on direct services or public awareness? We don't know. We certainly haven't answered that question."

Coordinated efforts

But according to public health professionals, both approaches are essential, because they reach two different audiences: kids and parents.

"I absolutely think we need both of them," said Lynette Schiess, substance abuse prevention and intervention specialist with the Utah State Board of Education.

"Research shows parents are the No. 1 reason kids don't drink, but kids are really in charge of themselves," she said. "They need to have the skills and abilities to stand up to peer pressure and make choices themselves, so we need a well-rounded approach. We can't just approach it from one side or the other, that's not systemic."

Schiess said they're currently gathering proposals and evaluating providers for the 2018-19 school year while working through the bill's actual wording — which requires a "school-based prevention presentation for students in grade 8 and grade 10." But is that a one-time event or an ongoing curriculum?

Research has shown that one-time prevention events are usually ineffective, said Schiess and Pat Bird, deputy director of operations for the Utah County Department of Drug and Alcohol Prevention and Treatment.

Even for adults, it's important to keep repeating the message against underage drinking, which is what Parents Empowered does through billboards, TV ads, public events, county fair booths and town hall meetings.

They've partnered with the U.S. Ski and Snowboard Teams, Kneaders, the city of Murray, the Kearns library system, Intermountain Healthcare and the Maverik Center, among others, to pass out T-shirts and flyers and wrap buses and hospital walls with messages warning parents about the dangers of underage drinking.

Such efforts have been recognized by the National Association of State Alcohol and Drug Abuse Directors with a National Exemplary Award and Utah's campaign has been replicated in Idaho, North Carolina and Wyoming, Bird pointed out in a letter he wrote to be forwarded by concerned voters to their legislators.

Committee co-chairman Rep. Curt Webb, R-Logan, said

he doesn't want the public to think the committee has set out to attack good programs, but as legislators "we have every right to examine our programs and see whether they're

effective."

However, having spent a fair amount of time talking with officials from the Utah Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control, he said he's impressed with what he's seen so far.

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"I have to say that it really looks like they're being quite effective in the things that they're doing," Webb said.

"We're seeing pretty good numbers, good data and there's a lot of sentiment to keep it. Personally, I think we're going to have a hard time eliminating that, based on the things that we've seen."

Since the Parents Empowered campaign started 12 years ago, the rates of drinking in Utah have continued to fall among adolescents, with the exception of last year, when the rate of drinking among high school seniors rose from 13.6 percent to 14.7 percent.

Yet the number that worries Murakami the most is 42.6 — the percentage of kids who used alcohol in the last year and who reported that they drank it at home, with their parents' permission.

Officials got that number from the Student Health and Risk Prevention survey, asked of Utah students in grades 6, 8, 10 and 12 every two years.

Among the questions students answered was, "How wrong do your parents feel it would be for you to drink beer, wine or hard liquor regularly?"

Of the kids who answered "very wrong," only 14 percent had tried alcohol at least once. However, of the kids who said their parents would only find it "wrong," nearly 57 percent had tried alcohol.

"What that tells us," says Murakami, "is it's important for parents to really establish and set clear consistent rules about not drinking alcohol. If there's a little bit ... of perceived parental acceptability, those kids are off drinking."

Parents over ads

Not only do parents need to set clear boundaries around alcohol, experts say they need to teach kids how to critique the advertisements themselves.

A recent study published in the Journal of Health Communication found that teens whose parents were critical of media messages about alcohol were more likely to think critically themselves about ads and social networking posts showing alcohol and less likely to endorse or engage with the alcohol brands online and offline.

"Parents have this incredible opportunity ... to equip their children with critical thinking, which is a life-long mechanism that can prevent them from making some decisions that might not lead to healthy outcomes," said Marie Louise Radanielina Hita, lead author and now a lecturer and researcher in the marketing department at HEC Montréal. "I really strongly believe in the beneficial effect of parents and parental mediation on their children's life."

Parental mediation is just a fancy way of referring to the ways parents talk to and interact with their children regarding media. If an ad shows a party where everyone's holding a can of beer and smiling, parents can teach their kids to ask questions like, "What are they trying to tell me or sell me?" "What are they not showing me?" or "Do I believe this is real life?"

That skepticism is healthy and important, and unlike

cynicism, encourages seeking out more information to either confirm or reject their first observation, says Bruce Pinkleton, interim dean of the Edward R. Murrow College of Communication at Washington State University and co-author of the study.

But Hita and her co-authors wanted to know if parental mediation is still influential when so much ad exposure now happens via social media, when parents aren't around to comment on it.

Researchers asked 658 undergraduates to agree or disagree with statements asking about the perceived reality of beer ads, the similarity to their own life, the extent that drinking would positively impact their social life, and a desire to do things seen in the ads.

They were also asked to recall strategies their parents had used in talking about ads, with questions like, "How often did your parents tell you about what ads are trying to do?" and "How often did your parents tell you they agree with something on TV?"

And true to their hypotheses, those whose parents embraced ads or did nothing to critique them were more likely to see alcohol ads and alcohol-related content on their social networks as real and exciting, leading to more engagement with the brand both online and off.

And the inverse was also true. If parents had critiqued ads and taught critical thinking skills to their kids, those

students saw online alcohol ads and alcohol content as less real and desirable, and showed less interaction with the brand overall — even years later as a college student.

"The government says we need to talk to our kids about alcohol. ... I've said for years that we need to (talk to our kids) about alcohol marketing," says David Jernigan, director of the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. "They see so much of it and parents can be powerful influencers and this study, to my mind, confirms that."

Kids will listen

In a recent Parents Empowered commercial, a teenage girl watches a movie with her family, sits beside them in the car, and reads on her bed, her parents smiling, but mute beside her.

"Seriously?" she asks, looking at the camera, "Just talk to me!"

The commercial reminds parents that there are moments every day to talk to their kids about alcohol, which is still the No. 1 drug among kids, says Jernigan.

Besides being illegal, underage drinking can alter young brain development as well as set up teens for a greater risk of alcohol dependency as they age.

In fact, 47 percent of people who begin drinking before

age 14 reported lifetime dependence, compared to 9 percent who began drinking after the age of 21, according to a 2006 study published in the Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine.

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism also notes that while youth drink less than adults overall, individual teens often drink more, or binge drink, which can lead to things like injury, sexual assault or even death.

Yet, despite those concerns, many parents feel torn between being a parent and a friend, said MJ Corcoran, an educator and family coach for Family Talk about Drinking, a parenting program from Anheuser-Busch.

As kids age and grow closer to peers, parents often feel like they need to "get them back," and may try to become the "cool" parent by allowing their kids to do things that other parents might not, including providing alcohol, Corcoran said.

Not only is that illegal, but it sends mixed messages, she said. Instead, parents can focus on building healthy relationships at each stage of their child's life.

"As much as they roll their eyes at us," says Corcoran, "we're still their main source, their first influence."

Parents Empowered emphasizes bonding, boundaries and monitoring, and reminds parents that even if they don't know exactly what to say, they should just start

talking and keep listening.

And because there are new parents created everyday, there's an unending supply of people who need to hear that message, says Murakami, who hopes the appropriations

subcommittee will recognize that and keep the program. "There's so much work that needs to be done," he said "It's hard to even imagine not being able to continue that effort."