

# In underage drinking Parent, child to be involved in legal process

By MATT SCHMITZ  
News Tribune

In his dealings with the public over the past year and a half, Cole County Prosecutor Bill Tackett has noticed an emergent refrain. People wanted to know what he planned to do about teen-age drinking in this community.

"The phrase you hear most often is 'Parents are hungry for leadership on this issue,'" Tackett said.

And while he doesn't pretend to have a cure-all solution, Tackett plans to adopt for his office a potentially controversial policy in hopes of satiating the public's hunger for change. But he can't do it without the parents.

The policy, which makes use of the prosecutor's discretion to dispose such cases before they reach court, is aimed at getting parents involved in the legal process when their child is charged with being a minor in possession of alcohol.

Currently, people under 21 may avoid the offense's appearing on their permanent record by pleading guilty and attending the monthly meeting of the Victims Impact Panel, as well as alcohol-awareness classes. But offenders often see the deferral program as a free pass, and sometimes parents aren't even aware their child is in trouble.

"And if they were aware, they didn't seem too concerned about this," he said.

Missouri Highway Patrol Sgt. Tim Tinnen said parental involvement as a form of modified punishment would be an effective deterrent to teen drinking, because, despite what teens might say, their parents' opinion of their behavior is important. He's confident compelling parents to be involved would translate into fewer alcohol-related accidents.

"You'd have to prove to me why it wouldn't work, because, at least on the surface, it seems like a good plan to me," Tinnen said.

**See PARENT, page 6**

## ☆ Parent

### From page one

Still being finalized, Tackett's plan would be to require in that deferral process that parents or guardians attend the victims-panel meeting and alcohol classes with their child, placing them in the same room with other parents who have lost children in alcohol-related accidents.

Participation by parents would be strictly voluntary, but declining would mean their child would have the offense on his or her permanent record.

"The law-enforcement efforts are not being bolstered the way they should be within our community, and this is just a way to start getting parental involvement at the onset," Tackett said. "It will cause the parents to pay more attention if they have to go through these classes and the Victims Impact

Panel.

"More importantly, they're going to be with their child, going through it, and hopefully, will open some lines of communication that may be currently closed."

The impetus for the new policy came out of task-force discussions on the matter, garnering the input of about 25 law enforcers, prevention advocates, parents and others. Tackett already has made his pitch to some civic groups and feels it has the backing of a fair cross-section of the community.

Still, he realizes not everyone is likely to jump onboard, at least not immediately. To his knowledge, this hasn't been attempted elsewhere, and prosecutors across the state have warned him of potential opposition.

"I don't mind the resistance, or any criticism of this policy, if it helps save even one trip to the

morgue to identify ... anyone who's been killed in an alcohol-related accident," he said.

To mitigate backlash, Tackett intends to include in the process a monthly meeting with parents and offending children prior to victims-panel meetings to help them understand the policy.

The change will not take effect immediately. During the next 60 days, Tackett will try to educate the community about the policy through meetings with varied civic organizations, schools and others, so no one feels blind-sided by it.

Tinnen, who served on Tackett's task force, said ideas from the community will be invaluable if the plan is to succeed in curbing teen drinking.

"It is a community problem; community input as far as punishment goes is appropriate," he said.  
[mschmitz@newstribune.com](mailto:mschmitz@newstribune.com)

6-18-04