Social Host Liability

Think twice before throwing a party for your underage student

It’s understandable that you want your student to have fun when he comes home for a break. But with the passing of many Social Host Liability Laws, throwing a party for underage students where alcohol is served—or even allowing a party to take place—could get you in a lot of trouble and end in tragedy.

Safer to Drink at Home?

Two-thirds of teens who drink get their alcohol from parents or other adults, according to the 2003 National Academy of Sciences Report. “Some parents believe that it’s safer for their teens to drink at home than to drink anywhere else,” according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Yet the responsibility can rest squarely on parents’ shoulders should something go wrong, as it too often does. For instance, a Pennsylvania parent was sentenced to a 1- to 4.5-year prison term for involuntary manslaughter after allowing underage students to drink at a party the parent hosted. Three students died in a drunk-driving accident after the party.

Social host liability laws hold adults who serve or provide alcohol to underage people criminally liable if that minor is killed or injured—or if that minor kills or injures someone else. Keep in mind that the laws often extend to include parents who are not home when the drinking occurs. Check out the nuances of your state laws to see how social host liability is interpreted.

Multiple Concerns for Hosts to Consider

One of the major concerns with underage drinking parties is drinking and driving. Parents may feel okay if they take students’ car keys. Yet, nothing is completely in their control because, as you well know, students can find access to other vehicles fairly easily. Plus, drinking and driving is just one concern when it comes to underage drinking and social host liability. Other issues include:

- sexual assault/rape
- alcohol poisoning
- property damage
- violence

Teen Party Ordinances

Many towns are instating social host ordinances, which, according to a January 2007 article from USA Today “give police discretion to target repeat offenders or the most egregious bashes. Most permit officers to cite a host if they identify a handful of underage drinkers among dozens of partiers.” These ordinances call for civil fines, which can range from $500 to $2,500 and up.

Be careful—and informed—before making choices about alcohol and underage students in your home. Providing alcohol and hosting underage drinking events can get parents and older siblings in some legal hot water. Yet the human toll, from injury to death, is the most sobering possibility of all.


― Francine Katz, vice president of communications and consumer affairs for Anheuser-Busch Companies, Inc.

"These parents may be well intentioned in hosting these parties—thinking no one will get hurt if they provide alcohol to minors only for a ‘special occasion’ and take the keys—but there is no way the parents can control all the variables. In addition, allowing teens and their friends to drink alcohol at parties is illegal; when adults condone such activities, it sends the message that it’s OK to break the law regardless of whether adults are around."

― Francine Katz, vice president of communications and consumer affairs for Anheuser-Busch Companies, Inc.

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