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PAGE TWO

Crackdown pledged on underage drinking

Cumberland County law enforcement officials promise to pursue and prosecute young drinkers.

By DAVID HENCH
Staff Writer

Cumberland County's top law enforcement officials gathered Tuesday to say they will do their part to crack down on underage drinking this spring as a way to stop some of the assaults and fatal car crashes that go with it.

"As we stand here, we can be almost assured that (this spring) some of our children will die in an alcohol-related incident," said Portland Police Chief Michael Chitwood at a Tuesday news conference with Cumberland County Sheriff Mark Dion and District Attorney Stephanie Anderson.

People younger than 21

caught with alcohol will be prosecuted, as will those who give them alcohol or a place to drink, Anderson said.

"We will be seeking significant sentences and by significant, I mean jail sentences in some of these cases," Anderson said at the news conference, held on the steps of the Cumberland County courthouse in Portland.

Research shows that alcohol can affect the development of an adolescent's brain and that someone who drinks by the age of 15 is more likely to become an alcoholic later in life, she said.

"Now we know there is no safe or reasonable manner for an adolescent to consume alcohol," Anderson said. Adults who help them do so will be held accountable, she said.

"This is about kids dying," Dion said, whether it be in a car crash on the interstate or

drowning in a lake. Dion said that as of April 1, the sheriff's office requires deputies to charge both juveniles who are found in possession of alcohol and those who give it to them.

"We will arrest you. We will bring you to jail. We have zero tolerance," he said.

Society's attitudes about underage drinking are evolving, said Erica Schmitz, of the nonprofit group Communities Mobilizing for Change on Alcohol, which organized the news conference.

"Communities are realizing how dangerous this can be for kids," she said. The issue includes economic, social and health consequences for the whole community, she said.

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Staff photo by John Patriquin
Sheriff Mark Dion, left, District Attorney Stephanie Anderson, Erica Schmitz and Portland police Chief Michael Chitwood announce their aim to crack down on underage drinking.