

Why should a community adopt a social host ordinance?

Tragic health, social, and economic problems result from the use of alcohol by youth. Wisconsin's rate of underage drinking, formerly the nation's highest, has in recent years dropped significantly to near the national average, but youth alcohol use is still a serious problem in our state. According to a 2013 report from the Underage Drinking Enforcement Training Center, underage drinking costs Wisconsin about \$322 million annually in tangible expenses, including medical care, criminal justice, property damage, and loss of work.¹

Many believe that the adoption of local social host ordinances has helped the rate of underage drinking in Wisconsin decline. The model social host ordinance, Two Rivers/Manitowoc, has been adopted by at least 40 villages, cities, towns and counties in Wisconsin. As an important part of a comprehensive plan to prevent and reduce alcohol misuse, a social host ordinance holds responsible those who provide the location for underage drinking, even if the organizer or host is not present at the party.

Social host ordinances complement-- but do not duplicate-- state law and local alcohol age compliance checks.

- State law prohibits providing alcohol to youth, but it can be very difficult or even impossible to prove who provided the alcohol to youth at an underage party. Parties can easily thwart the investigation by turning off the lights and remaining inside when police arrive.
- Containing underage drinking parties can be problematic. It may encourage rash and dangerous behavior, such as attempting to escape, and fails to hold accountable those who allowed the gathering to occur.
- Social host ordinances efficiently deny youth locations for underage drinking. When combined with alcohol age compliance checks, a community can effectively reduce youth access to alcohol from both commercial and noncommercial (social host) sources.



Model Social Host Ordinance: Quick Facts

- A broad definition of the "host" allows anyone who organized or facilitated the party to be held accountable, regardless of whether they provided the alcohol or were present at the event.

¹ Underage Drinking in Wisconsin: The Facts. Underage Drinking Enforcement Training Center, 2013.

http://www.walhdab.org/resource/resmgr/Custom_Site/WI_Underage_Drinking_Costs_U.pdf. Underage drinking is a causal factor in a host of serious problems, including homicide, suicide, traumatic injury, drowning, burns, violent and property crime, high-risk sex, fetal alcohol syndrome, alcohol poisoning, and the need for treatment of alcohol abuse and dependence.

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- Also held responsible are adults who fail to take reasonable steps to prevent underage drinking on property they control, such as securing the alcohol on the premises or arranging for the property to be monitored.
 - In the Two Rivers/Manitowoc model, the host need not be an adult (age 18 or older).
 - If property owners are absent, and it is unclear if they were aware of the illegal drinking, officers may investigate and, if appropriate, issue a citation later.
 - Citations are not automatically issued for every occurrence of underage drinking on the property. For example, a social host citation is unlikely to be issued to farm owners when underage drinking occurred in distant fields.
 - The ordinance anticipates the wide variety of locations where facilitated underage drinking occurs, including recreational property, outbuildings, and rented hotel rooms, as well as private homes.
 - As a municipal sanction, a social host citation does not carry a criminal conviction, but significant forfeitures (usually \$1,000 for a first offense) discourage repeat offenses.
 - Communities have found publicizing citations and the substantial amount of the forfeiture has a deterrent effect.

A social host ordinance sends a strong community-wide message that youth alcohol consumption is unhealthy, unsafe and unacceptable.

This fact sheet was created by [Community Health Improvement in Action](#) in cooperation with the [Wisconsin Alcohol Policy Project \(WAPP\)](#) of the University of Wisconsin Law School. For more information about Social Host Ordinances, please contact Julia Sherman, coordinator of WAPP: julia.sherman@wisc.edu.