Plan aimed at reducing teen traffic fatalities

Acadiana bureau

LAFAYETTE — April, May and June are supposed to be months of excitement and happiness for high school students attending senior proms and preparing for graduation.

But that period can turn into tragedy since it’s also when more teens die in traffic accidents than the rest of the year combined, according to the city of Lafayette’s Alcohol Traffic Action Campaign.

ATAC, which has been working to reduce DWI-related deaths since last year, has targeted the high school students with a Graduation ‘84 Task Force, said Phil Bordelon, ATAC director.

“We intend to save lives, young lives, for each one is precious,” Bordelon said.

The program involves students, parents, counselors, teachers, police, the Lafayette Junior League and the Lafayette chapter of Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

According to ATAC statistics, alcohol-related crashes are the leading cause of death for persons in the 15 to 24 age group, which has a higher death rate now than 20 years ago.

Also according to ATAC’s statistics, 14 teens are killed daily nationwide and 360 are seriously injured or crippled because of drinking and driving. The Task Force is working on several fronts to attack the problem.

First, youths are being asked to appoint designated drivers who will not drink at parties and dances and will later drive friends home.

But students also are planning events that don’t involve alcohol, said Matthew Anderson, a Carencro High School junior.

“You don’t have to get drunk to have a good time,” he said.

Also, parents are being warned about the possible legal liability for serving alcohol in their homes, especially to guests under 18, Bordelon said.

He added that serving alcohol to someone under 18 is illegal. Regardless of age, if someone has a drink at a home and he later becomes involved in an alcohol-related accident, the host could be sued for civil damages, Bordelon said.

Law enforcement agencies are increasing enforcement of drunken-driving laws, and police are checking establishments for possible liquor sales to minors, he said.

A business which sells alcohol to a person who is hurt or killed in an alcohol-related accident also could face civil liability, he said.

Two things are specifically being done for high school proms to warn of the dangers of drinking and getting behind the wheel.

ATAC will have a large sign warning “Don’t Drink and Drive” to be displayed at the Municipal Auditorium during proms, Bordelon said.

Also, MADD has arranged to have cards, warning against drinking and driving, placed in the pockets of tuxedos rented for Lafayette high school proms, he said.

The Lafayette Parish public school system also is getting involved in the overall problem of drinking and other forms of drug abuse, said Wayne Vasher, parish school superintendent.

He said report cards are being sent to all parents, informing them that their children have received four to eight hours of education about drug-abuse prevention.

Also, local Junior League members have joined ATAC workers and police officers to make presentations to students on drug abuse, Vasher said.