Teen drinking control ideas volleyed

By MIKE DUNNE
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Last week, retailers said it isn’t their fault.
This week, law enforcement agencies said it isn’t their fault, either.
A task force that is studying teen-age drinking and the availability of alcohol to minors continued to search for the answer to curb the problem Thursday.

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And Family Court Judge Jennifer Luce said that once a teen-ager is caught drinking, there’s not really much that can be done.

“Efforts are already in effect. Deputies are checking stores ... for various criminal acts. This, in turn, uncovers purchases of alcohol,” said O’Connor, the chief of detectives.

“The main problem I see ... is the employees of the various stores,” O’Connor said. Sales clerks need to be more attentive, O’Connor said.

“Unless we receive help from convenience stores and other outlets, we can only do so much of a job,” O’Connor said.

He suggested an awareness program that would involve parents
“We pick one up and say ‘He’s drunk. We caught him with a six-pack.’ The parents says ‘Oh, my child doesn’t do that.’”

O’Connor said he thought retail clerks were doing “a fairly decent job. We haven’t had that many complaints.”

Chief Bonanno said that one “can’t hold the clerks totally at fault.”

Nor, can the police be held at fault either, he said.

“Law enforcement cannot be blamed for dragging our feet,” he said.

There are too many miles and too many crimes to be focusing just on juvenile drinking, Bonanno said. He said that if pressured, he could put a 30-car task force on the streets, but said, “be realistic.”

High visibility is another police tactic but “it just moves them from one convenience store to another.”

He, too, suggested more input from parents.

Bonanno suggested:
• Deterring teen-age alcohol purchases with the help of store owners.
• Assisting in educational programs within the school system.
• Reasonable agreements with the places that sell alcohol.

Only 23 alcohol-related offenders were brought before family court last year, Judge Luce said.

The judge said the family court does not have the authority to fine children or their parents and that results in penalties “with no teeth.”

She said that judges can outline an “informal adjustment agreement” which is a form of probation.

“We need to give the law some kind of teeth. The kids know there’s no penalty,” the judge said.

Another problem – which both O’Connor and Bonanno agreed on – is to change the law so that law enforcement officers are paid for off-duty court appearances as they are in district court.

Often parents do not involve themselves with their children and there is no way the family court can make parents be involved or to supervise probation or community service work if it were allowed as a penalty.

State law would have to be changed first, she said.

The task force, which had hoped to end its fact-finding phase Thursday and begin formulating recommendations next week, for the Metro Council will instead push that schedule back a week.

The group will hear from Parish Attorney Lynn Williams, Assistant District Attorney Warren Hebert and hope to hear from officials from the Department of Motor Vehicles next week.