

[< Back](#) | [Home](#)

Alcohol offenses rise 135 percent

Police step up efforts against drinking

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Drinking on campus has grown riskier this year, as a Public Safety crackdown on alcohol offenses has led to a far greater number of charges.

According to University of Maine Public Safety records, there were 40 general alcohol offenses in the first six weeks of school this fall, compared to 17 in the first six weeks of school last fall, an increase of 135 percent. Illegal possession of alcohol by minors also jumped 13 percent and intoxication incidents increased as well.

UM Public Safety Chief Noel March said the new focus on alcohol was a response to a high number of what he calls "alcohol-related offenses" like drunk driving, fights and dorm vandalism. "The fuel in the tank of each of those is excessive, irresponsible use of alcohol," March said.

This year, March has increased the number of foot patrols around campus rather than officers driving. The patrols are taking officers through dormitories more often and bringing them closer to students. "We view alcohol enforcement as being preventative and proactive, as one aspect of problem-solving here for our community," March said.

According to March, the campus has shown significant need for an anti-alcohol campaign. He recalled a weekend before fall break when three ambulances from Cutler, Orono and Old Town had to deal with simultaneous cases of alcohol poisoning at residence halls across campus. In the course of the night there were two more alcohol poisoning cases, bringing the number of students rushed to Eastern Maine Medical Center to five.

"Yeah, we're going to focus on liquor violations," March said after recounting the alcohol poisonings. "It's our obligation and it's our responsibility to do that."

Lieutenant Paul Paradis of Public Safety agreed. "We see a lot of high risk behavior in the student group as the result of consumption of alcohol," Paradis said. "These things are an indicator to us that there's a problem - that something needs to be addressed."

Paradis said Public Safety has had plenty of cooperation from around campus. The police have been

setting up safety checks on the roads in and out of campus on weekends looking for drunk drivers, and student volunteers have assisted in the efforts.

This year, there has only been one Driving Under the Influence offense on campus, compared to 13 in the same period of time last fall. Zero tolerance offenses-when a minor is caught driving with any amount of alcohol in his or her blood-have dropped from five to zero in the same period.

"We don't realistically think we've eliminated it, but we've impacted it," Paradis said of drunk driving.

Vandalism and dorm damage charges have also seen a drop this year: 35% in the first six weeks according to Public Safety records. March said he believes the crackdown on drinking has helped to curtail the amount of dorm damage.

March said the department is not profiling fraternities, nor is it out to stop drinking on campus. "We don't have officers sitting in the bushes with night-vision goggles waiting for a kid with a plastic cup to walk by," March said. "We're way too busy for that."

Instead, officers follow what they call "lightning rod events," usually public displays of underage intoxication, which they try to trace back to specific parties. "If that student shares with us where they had been partying, then we're apt to follow that lead," March said.

Last week, UMaine Alcohol and Drug Education Programs held Alcohol Awareness Week in conjunction with Peer Ed. Greek Life was involved as well. Also, Delta Tau Delta held a "car bash" near memorial Union to raise awareness of drunk driving where students could hit an old car with a sledgehammer.

Heidi Souder, a work-study student working in the ADEP offices and a fourth-year kinesiology and physical education major, said the program doesn't aim to prevent campus drinking. "We're here to talk about safe ways to drink," Souder said.

March echoed the sentiment. "This isn't the War on Beer," he said. A minor offense may not even lead to a charge, March said, but instead to a referral to Dean of Students Robert Dana or ADEP director Lauri Sidelko.

The police are looking for "conspicuous consumption of alcohol and intoxication where we're put in the position that we have to do something," according to March. "We're negligent if we don't."

Alcohol offenses:

Fall 05: 17

Fall 06: 40

Based on records from Sept. 1 to Oct. 17, 2005 and Sept. 1 to Oct. 16, 2006

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