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FORUM EXPLORES “MYTHS” VS. REALITIES OF UNDERAGE DRINKING

PORTLAND, ME – Civic engagement is one of Maine’s greatest traditions. What better time than in this season of town meetings, for area residents to come together to address one of our biggest challenges?

Underage drinking, Maine’s #1 drug problem, is the topic of a wave of town hall meetings held across the state this spring. Portland residents are invited to share their priorities and concerns at their own city-wide public forum, “Myth vs. Reality: What do you REALLY know about underage drinking?” on March 29, 5:30 - 8:00 pm at Merrill Rehearsal Hall.

“Alcohol use by children has profound and devastating consequences. Heavy alcohol use negatively affects developing brains and leads to greatly increased chances of alcohol addiction,” says Attorney General Steve Rowe, who will be speaking at the event. Steve Rowe is participating in town hall meetings across the state because, he says, “We must come together as one community to change the social beliefs of young people in relation to drinking. These forums are the first step toward this change.”

“Add addiction and negative effects on the brain, a criminal record, fines and jail time as potential consequences of underage drinking, and it just doesn’t sound like that much fun any more,” says Cumberland County District Attorney Stephanie Anderson. Stephanie Anderson will also be presenting and will highlight the legal consequences of furnishing alcohol to minors. Other speakers will include members of Portland’s law enforcement community, and local youth working on projects and research regarding underage drinking. According to data from the 2004 Maine Youth Drug and Alcohol Use Survey (MYDAUS), alcohol use among Portland students is above the state average in every grade. Even more concerning, between 8th and 12th grades, binge drinking rates among Portland students are also higher than the state average, reaching a high of 37% by the 12th grade.

“Research shows that in order to reduce underage drinking, we must change the community environment that is allowing it to happen,” says Erica Schmitz, Coordinator of the forum’s sponsoring organization, Portland CMCA (Communities Mobilizing for Change on Alcohol). “This event is an opportunity for our entire community—including parents, young people, teachers, business owners, law enforcement and elected officials—to come together to discuss the role we play in creating a solution.”

Merrill Hall will be open at 5:30 for forum attendees to enjoy refreshments and view informational tables hosted by local community organizations. Participants include the District Attorney’s office, Portland Public Schools, PATHS, Healthy Maine Partnerships, Minority Health Program, Family Health Services, Portland Boys & Girls Club, Girl Scouts, PROP Peer Leaders, TREK, Day One, Youth Alternatives, and Rippleffect. Partners in the statewide effort include the Office of Substance Abuse, the Governor’s Office and First Lady, the Attorney General’s office, Department of Public Safety, Medical Care Development, Maine Association of Prevention Programs, Ethos Marketing and Design, and the Youth Empowerment and Policy Group.