

SHATTERED DREAMS: A COUNTY HOSPITAL'S COMMITMENT TO PREVENTING TEENAGE DRINKING AND DRIVING



Authors: Katherine Bare, MSN, RN, CPEN, and Robin Garza, MSN, RN, TCRN, CAISS, Houston, TX
Section Editor: Anna Maria Valdez, PhD, RN, CEN, CFRN, CNE, C-NPT, FAEN

CE Earn Up to 5.5 Hours. See page 591.

The number of ED visits for injury and illness related to acute alcohol consumption has increased by 51.5% from 2006 to 2014, creating an increasing workload for nurses across the United States.¹ As this number continues to increase, trauma centers and emergency departments need to be diligent in proactively focusing on injury prevention efforts. One specific population susceptible to injuries sustained as a result of alcohol is minors. The legal requirement of waiting to consume alcohol until age 21 years continues to be proved fallible given that people between the ages of 12 to 20 years old consume 11% of all alcohol in the United States.² Shockingly, 90% of the time that teens are consuming alcohol, it is in the form of binge drinking.² This reckless behavior results in more than 4300 deaths of underage drinkers each year.²

Local Problem

A county hospital in Texas recognizes the dangers of underage drinking and is committed to preventing alcohol-related driving injuries and deaths. According to the Texas Department of Transportation, in 2017, 6.57% of all driver fatalities in alcohol-related crashes were younger than 21 years. Harris County leads the state in total crashes relating to driving under

the influence.³ The county hospital's mission is to improve the health of those most in need, regardless of income, insurance, race, ethnicity, or any other potentially defining characteristics. During the past 13 years, the organization has implemented and adapted a program called Shattered Dreams that is aimed at decreasing the prevalence of dangerous behaviors behind the wheel. Shattered Dreams was developed as an expansion of the "Every 15 Minutes" program in 1988 by the Bexar County DWI Task Force Advisory Board.⁴

Shattered Dreams

In partnership with the Harris County community, the hospital organization has executed 40 Shattered Dreams programs in Houston high schools through the generosity of grant funding. This program is an intense collaboration between Harris County schools, first responders, hospital volunteers, local officials, and several other key partners. The 2-day event includes 4 primary phases of planning and implementation.

PHASE 1: PREPARATION

Months in advance, the organization's trauma services department arranges meetings with school liaisons, the district attorney's office, the DWI Task Force, local police, and several other entities in an effort to create the most realistic and comprehensive scenario possible. All junior and senior students are asked to attend both the crash scene and the assembly. Of these students, 30 students are selected by school staff to participate in the crash scene and the hospital experience. The 30 students are chosen from different social circles in the hope that the program's influence will continue to infiltrate decisions and relationships long after the program is completed. Parent meetings are held to inform families of what to expect, obtain consent, and answer questions. Prior to the event, each participant and volunteer receives an outline for their expectations and responsibilities as the program progresses.

Katherine Bare is Injury Prevention & Outreach Coordinator, Harris Health System, Houston, TX.

Robin Garza is Trauma Program Director, Harris Health System, Houston, TX.

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For correspondence, write: Katherine Bare, MSN, RN, CPEN, Harris Health System, 1504 Ben Taub Loop, Houston, TX 77030; E-mail: Katherine.bare@harrishealth.org.

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PHASE 2: CRASH DAY

The intensity of the program begins on the first morning when the junior and senior classes gather for a mock crash scene held on the school campus. A professional videographer captures the entirety of the day's events. Eight of the 30 selected students and their parents are actors for crash. As students watch the scene unfold, they see their classmates in an entirely different light. Physically, the students are made up with moulage to depict devastating injuries. The driver of the vehicle is uninjured and unable to pass a field sobriety test. He or she is then placed in handcuffs and escorted to jail. The perpetrator goes before a judge in a live courtroom to be charged with intoxicated manslaughter and booked. Two victims are pronounced dead at the scene and are taken away in a hearse as their parents cry at the sight of their dead child. Two critically ill victims are rushed to medical care—one by ambulance and one by helicopter. The remaining participants are treated on scene for minor injuries and then questioned by police.

Once the ambulance patient arrives at the level I trauma center, emergency nurses, critical care nurses, and trauma doctors simulate a trauma code that is captured by professional videographers. The victim succumbs to his or her simulated injuries, and the parents are notified of their child's death and given their remaining possessions and sentimental valuables. The weight of preventable death is palpable both to the in-person participants and those watching the video recording.

Meanwhile, the student body has resumed normal class schedules. As the day progresses, a participant dressed as the grim reaper enters a classroom, selects a new victim, reads a prepared obituary highlighting the achievements of the student, and reports that his or her death occurred at the hands of an impaired driver. The victims are removed from class and made up with ghostlike faces and black attire. By the end of the day, all selected victims gather in the hallways and present themselves as "dead" to represent the statistics on alcohol-related fatalities on any given day. As the crash scene ends and the symbolic deaths of their classmates resonate in their minds, all of the students are released from school with the exception of the 30 student participants. At each stage of day 1, volunteers are actively organizing resources and personnel to present a polished and professional event.

PHASE 3: THE HOSPITAL EXPERIENCE

A unique element of this organization's Shattered Dreams program is that the 30 students leave school and arrive at the hospital for an all-night learning experience. In true "lock-in" style, the students have activities through all hours

of the night. As this program has grown, so has support from hospital employees and community partners. During the overnight experience, students have the opportunity to hear from trauma and orthopedic surgeons and may be able to observe real trauma patients in the emergency center and operating room if the situation allows. One of the most emotional aspects of the evening is hearing from a victim arranged by Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Often these speakers have lost a loved one as a result of a drunk-driving accident and speak from the heart about the effects of impaired driving. Students are given time to personally reflect on what it would be like to be killed as a result of drunk driving by writing a letter to their families as if they had died in an accident. The organization not only recognizes the importance of educating on the dangers of drunk driving but also places a high priority on allowing time for processing this heavy content through debriefing exercises.

PHASE 4: THE ASSEMBLY

On the second morning, an assembly marks the end of the Shattered Dreams experience. Because the majority of the student body was not part of the hospital experience, additional speakers organized by Mothers Against Drunk Driving and/or other community resources share their stories. One of the highlights for the students during this portion of the event is watching footage composed by the videographer from the prior day. They are able to see what happened after the participants left the scene and went either to the hospital or jail. Lasting impressions and final thoughts are shared by student participants, school staff, and hospital personnel.

Current Impact and Future Goals

The students who attended the program frequently agree that the effects of this program far surpass the 2-day curriculum. In addition, the hospital system has received numerous thank-you letters from students because of the positive influence this program has had on their decision making and behavior. No data specific to this program are available; however, from 2015 to 2017, a 45.5% decrease in DUI driver fatalities among persons younger than 21 years occurred in the city of Houston.³ Combined with other Houston efforts, Shattered Dreams serves as an effective injury prevention program for teenage drinking and driving awareness.

As Shattered Dreams continues to be a prominent force in teenage drinking and driving education for Harris County high school students, the organization always strives for improvement. The hospital system has acquired

32 safe-driving monitoring devices for students to receive before and after the Shattered Dreams course. The organization will be able to see if there is a quantifiable improvement in driving behaviors for those who attended the program. Because the organization values continued expansion, it continues to strive for a greater impact in the Houston area.

Conclusion

Through partnering with multidisciplinary entities both in the hospital system and in the community, the Shattered Dreams program is an asset to Harris County. With extensive efforts and an intensive curriculum, students are challenged to assess the brevity of the “fun” associated with underage drinking and are vividly reminded of its consequences. The hospital system seeks to make Houston a better, safer place to live. Shattered Dreams is an integral step in achieving that goal.

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Submissions to this column are encouraged and may be sent to **Anna Maria Valdez, PhD, RN, CEN, CFRN, CNE, C-NPT, FAEN** Annnav409@gmail.com