



A Pandemic Spring Break – As students seek much-needed relief from semester and restrictions, program works to prevent underage drinking and promote smart health decisions

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Spring break is well underway for El Paso and Texas college students, and the usual annual markers of the season are all around – outdoor events, warmer and longer days – as students get out for a break from the semester’s work and schedules. This year, however, the season also marks one year since the COVID-19 pandemic began and a moment for considering the many ways youth have been – and may continue to be – impacted.

The fact is, despite social distancing mandates and stay at home orders, youth drinking never really subsided as a result of the pandemic. Data and anecdotal evidence actually indicates that alcoholic beverage intake increased over the past year, including among younger drinkers. And Spring Break presents even more likelihood of underage drinking, along with its many associated consequences.

The consequences of this can be life-altering. Underage and excessive drinking leads to increased risk of immediate and long-term health damage, negative impacts to brain development, road injuries and death, and unwanted sexual encounters. Memory, coordination and critical thinking skills can all be harmed from alcohol use.

On average, three quarters of college age males will get drunk on a daily basis during Spring Break. 44 percent of college women will do the same. About half of college students will binge drink during this time, many to the point of passing out at least once during the vacation.

However, this isn’t the case for all students. Many recognize the potential risks and will take a stand against drinking and – even more significantly – will help their peers do the same. One important program helping encourage these healthy decisions among local El Paso students is Texans for Safe and Drug-Free Youth’s (TxSDY) Screening and Brief Intervention (SBI) Program, which they have organized in partnership with University of Texas at El Paso.

Unique in its evidence-based approach, the program tackles the issue of underage and young adult drinking with preventative, rather than reactionary, tactics. SBI has proven to be a key resource for prevention of underage and dangerous drinking on college campuses, teaching educators, counselors

and other professionals how to engage with students in new, proactive ways and provide them with tactics for accessing drinking behaviors and making informed decisions about drinking.

The program has continued throughout the pandemic, and has successfully reached hundreds of students over the past year. Many have remarked that the experience is one they will continue to leverage over the next several years and beyond. With new skillsets in motivational decision making and behavioral change, these students are employed with valuable tools for promoting positive behavior in many aspects of their lives.

The past year has been a year of seemingly endless rules, restrictions and limitations. And this Spring Break, many students are understandably seeking a respite and a week of fun. However, arming students during this “week of no rules” with the information and tools to help them navigate situations where drinking becomes problematic can help change decisions and save lives.