

# 'Cops in Shops' underage drinking enforcement kicks off on the Jersey Shore



Officials kicked off the summer "Cops in Shops" initiative on the Jersey Shore. *(Ashley Peskoe/NJ.com)*

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**BELMAR** – Officials kicked off an enforcement initiative Thursday aimed at catching minors trying to buy booze at the Jersey Shore this summer.

Twenty-eight police departments on the Jersey Shore will receive funding for the “Cops in Shops” program, which allows officers to work undercover at retail locations to help catch underage patrons trying to purchase alcohol or adults buying alcohol for minors, Division of Alcoholic Beverage Control Director Michael Halfacre said at a press conference.

Typically officers work undercover in teams of two, Halfacre said, and will either be inside or outside liquor stores watching for underage buyers or adults purchasing alcohol for underage drinkers.

“We have a duty to New Jersey’s young people to ensure that their summer at the shore are a source of happy memories and not regretted decisions,” Halfacre said. “The message that we’re trying to extend to teens and adults thinking of breaking the law is just don’t do it.”

This year, about \$61,000 in funding from the Division of Highway Traffic Safety is available for the participating police departments to run the undercover details, Halfacre said. The program runs through mid-September.

“Drinking underage can lead to horrible physical consequences – assault, unwanted or unplanned sexual activity, motor vehicle crashes, disruption in normal growth and much more,” Halfacre said. “The emotional price from drinking can be poor performance in school, cause memory problems and social issues.”

The “Cops in Shops” program was created by the Century Council, which is funded by distillers. The state adopted the program from the not-for-profit

organization in 1996 and has since made more than 10,000 arrests during the initiatives, Halfacre said.

Acting Monmouth County Prosecutor Christopher Gramiccioni said underage drinking is more than just a “youthful indiscretion,” and instead could have greater consequences.

“Beyond just being illegal, alcohol serves as a gateway drug in many cases,” Gramiccioni said.

He added that many teenagers believe they’re invincible or may think that it’s not going to happen to them.

“But the reality is, I can tell you from my side of the house that it does, and it’s unfortunate when we’re pulling dead teenagers out of cars or we’re breaking up physical assaults, or people are being prosecuted for sex assaults,” Gramiccioni said, while acknowledging that it doesn’t happen in every case.

Belmar Mayor Matt Doherty also said businesses should be aware that selling to underage patrons is bad for their establishment.

“It may seem like a quick, easy sale at the time, but in the long run it’s going to negatively impact your business, your livelihood,” Doherty said.

Drinking underage or providing alcohol to minors could be punishable by up to six months in jail and up to a \$1,000 fine. Establishments selling to minors risk losing their license for a period of time, depending on the number of offenses.

Towns participating in the grant program include Absecon, Avalon, Barnegat Township, Beach Haven, Belmar, Egg Harbor Township, Harvey Cedars, Jackson Township, Lake Como, Lakehurst, Lakewood, Lavallette Boro, Long Beach Township, Lower Township, Manchester Township, Neptune Township, Neptune City, North Wildwood, Ocean Gate, Ocean Township, Point Pleasant Beach, Point Pleasant Boro, Sea Isle City, Seaside Heights, Ship Bottom, Spring Lake Heights, Toms River Township and Wildwood.

