

Passing the Bars

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By Katie Anderson

A job selling and serving alcohol can sound like a party, but along with the fun of pouring pints comes a great responsibility.

“You have to be able to say enough is enough, and you have to be confident,” said Nick Fox, a bartender at Olive Black Martini Bar in Richmond.

“People like to know they’re being taken care of,” he said. “... Also, you don’t want it coming back on you as a server if they get into a DUI or get into an accident or something bad happens.”

To help ensure that those selling and serving alcoholic drinks are armed with knowledge of relevant laws and best practices, several McHenry County communities require liquor license holders and beverage servers to be certified. Who must take certification courses and which courses they must take varies widely, however, from town to town.

In Crystal Lake, the owner and general manager of each establishment with a liquor license are supposed to have proof of Beverage Alcohol Sellers and Servers Education and Training (BASSET).

“We ask for proof within 30 days of issuing a license,” said George Koczwara, deputy city manager.

BASSET is the state’s alcohol seller/server training program. Generally, training lasts about four hours and includes instruction on how to spot a fake ID, updates on recent changes to liquor laws, and tips on how to tell whether a patron has had too much.

Across unincorporated McHenry County, BASSET training is required for all who sell or serve alcoholic beverages. That includes bar and restaurant managers and anyone whose job description entails checking identification of those who want to buy alcohol.

The villages of Huntley and Fox Lake also require everyone who serves or sells to get certified in BASSET or Training for Intervention Procedures (TIPS) – another state program – or both.

“The training is really an important component to this industry because it can be the Achilles heel for all of us,” said Charlie Mormino, who has been a BASSET instructor since 1999 and also runs Charlie’s Professional Bartending school and owns Olive Black Martini Bar.

Ignorance, Mormino said, rather than malice, on the part of bartenders contributes to alcohol-related tragedies such as car accidents.

With programs such as BASSET and TIPS, the ignorance has been replaced with a feeling of responsibility, he said.

Some cities and villages including Woodstock and Lake in the Hills do not require BASSET certification, but they do run their own liquor server education programs.

The city of Woodstock requires liquor licensees to go to a training seminar each spring before licenses will be renewed.

At the training, local police give an overview of laws and regulations, said Cindy Smiley, executive assistant to Woodstock’s mayor. Also, a representative from the Illinois State Police or Secretary of State’s office typically give a presentation on identifying fake IDs.

“Many of the licensees do bring bartenders and waitstaff with,” Smiley said.

The village of Fox River Grove is new to any type of certification. Last month, the board voted to require every bar and restaurant owner or manager to get BASSET certified in order to renew their

liquor licenses this spring.

The village doesn't expect that most license holders will mind.

"I don't see any problem with it," said Bob Blasko, also known as Tin Man. He owns Tin Man's Sports Pub on Route 22 in Fox River Grove.

Blasko has required all his bartenders to be BASSET-certified for at least seven years, so the new law won't be a problem for his business, he said.

"It is just good business to have your servers and your bartenders BASSET-certified," Blasko said. "It is a good thing for the employer and for the village."

Although he is a fan of the program, Blasko pointed out one area where he thought the BASSET could be improved.

"You can give someone the tools and teach them the proper way of checking IDs, but as far as cutting customers off, it doesn't go deep enough," he said. "You just don't tell a customer they are done, it takes a little finesse."

Most who work in the liquor-selling industry are happy to participate in BASSET and other training sessions, local instructors said.

Lt. Jeff Norris of the Fox Lake Police Department has been a TIPS and BASSET teacher in Fox Lake since 2004.

"If they have never been through a training before, they think, 'Oh my God, I have to sit here for four hours,'" Norris said. "The last person that a bartender wants to sit and listen to for four hours is a police officer."

Once he starts teaching, however, things change.

Norris shares stories from his side of the bar – the drunks, the car accidents. The servers talk about dealing with angry or persuasive patrons, among other challenges, he said.

Norris said he believed that every bartender and waitress and anybody who sells, serves or draws alcohol should have training.

"Just requiring license holders, to me, that's a waste of time; those aren't the people who deal with [the customers]," he said.