

TIPS leads to smarter alcohol sales

By Dick Lindsay, Berkshire Eagle Staff

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PITTSFIELD — Christine Bump was terrified when she originally took the TIPS training four years ago. Bump, and her co-owner Bill Heaton, needed TIPS certification — Training for Intervention Procedures — because they were venturing into the restaurant/ bar business for the first time, opening up the Pittsfield Brew Works on Depot Street.

“I learned that by being an owner, if someone else makes a mistake, I’m responsible,” said Bump. “That scared the daylights out of me.”

Bump said it was “less scary” when she recently took a refresher course, partly because she now had four years of restaurant/bar experience under her belt.

“The training was also good the second time around because I got to communicate with my staff,” she added.

Pittsfield Brew Works was one of 69 businesses with liquor licenses in the Pittsfield area who, in December, sent 231 bartenders, servers, and package store clerks to either repeat or participate for the first time in the TIPS program, courtesy of the Pittsfield Prevention Partnership. TIPS taught them how to prevent underage drinking, intoxication and drunken driving.

The partnership used a \$17,000 grant to pay for the training — while not legally required in Massachusetts — is a must for liquor license holders in most Berkshire communities.

“We’re not about enforcement,” said Paul Lange, coordinator for the partnership. “We’re here to work with businesses to make the community healthy in general.”

It’s a message the partnership especially wanted to get across to the first-time TIPS students, some of whom already had 20 to 30 years experience of serving alcohol to the public.

“This round of training I had six or seven owners who never before did TIPS, but were glad we offered it,” said Daniel Zunitch, who conducting the training and has been a certified TIPS instructor for the past three years.

He added a few owners who took the course, were caught violating liquor license regulations and admitted they should have taken the TIPS course sooner.

The free TIPS training comes on the heels of the Pittsfield Prevention Partnership’s three-pronged approach to combat underage drinking in the city, which began just before Thanksgiving. While that is a “huge issue,” according to Lange, the partnership’s latest project is also promoting the safe and responsible sale of alcoholic beverages.

“This is a positive thing,” said Zunitch. “We want to show establishments how to make a profit, provide good customer service and deal with situations as they arise.”

Zunitch, himself a bartender for more than 25 years, teaches bar and restaurant employees to pay attention to all customers drinking in their establishments, not just the ones they are serving.

And if any appear drunk, shut them off politely.

“You want to handle the situation with a smile, rather than just saying ‘you’re shut off,’ “ said Zunitch.

“I’ve certainly had to shut people off, especially at weddings,” said Lisa Puleri, manager of the Berkshire Hills Country Club. “People usually don’t contest the decision and those involved with that person are helpful in the matter.”

Zunitch also spends part of his instruction debunking myths about intoxication. He said drinking coffee to sober up or some people having the ability to “hold their liquor,” just aren’t true.

“No force or will can lower blood-alcohol content,” Zunitch said.

When it comes to underage drinking, Zunitch has found some retail clerks don’t take 3rd party sales seriously.

“A store is held liable if they have a reason to believe a customer is buying for someone underage,” said Zunitch. “This is one area (about which) many don’t realize their obligation.”

One area that both bartenders/servers and package store clerks must deal with is recognizing fake identification.

Zunitch said some local businesses have invested in special devices to scan drivers licenses and other forms of ID to make sure they are valid.

But most owners rely on well-trained employees, experience and in some cases, their patrons, to prevent their establishments from serving minors.

“Customers will say ‘That person is not 21,’ as the underage drinker walks in,” said John McNinch, owner of the Olde Heritage Tavern in downtown Lenox.

“Being a local tavern, everyone knows each other and they look out for me,” McNinch added. “They know this is my livelihood.”

McNinch and the other liquor license holders say avoiding alcohol related trouble boils down to creating the right atmosphere for their patrons.

“We don’t do shots or sell pitchers of beer,” said Bump. “We’re all about enjoying what your consuming, not getting drunk.”