

Underage alcohol operation defended

From the Pinedale, WY, Roundup.

Despite the scraggly beard, he was still underage, not yet able to legally buy or consume alcohol.

But employees at four Pinedale bars and restaurants still took the bait, serving the minor alcohol in a “sting” operation being implemented by the Sublette County Sheriff’s Office (SCSO) in the past couple of months.

The operation was financed by state funding that was handed down to the individual counties, and to receive the funding, each county was required to perform at least eight checks on liquor-license holders.

Starting in February and finishing in March, the SCSO randomly checked 26 throughout the county, finding eight establishments in violation, which entails a fine up to \$750 for the first-time violation. A second offense could result in a fine as well as the loss of the liquor license.

“(The operation) was just mainly to discourage underage drinking,” said Sheriff Wayne “Bardy” Bardin. “And to discourage those who even look like they’re over 21 from purchasing alcohol.”

Prior to the operation, the SCSO also notified owners that the checks would be performed.

“It was mainly for the establishment owners — information for them to pass on to the people that are actually dispensing the alcohol,” said Bardin.

“(The deputy in charge of the operation) has actually been very easy to work with,” said Pat Bozner, owner of the Corral Bar. “He came by two to three weeks before and said, ‘We’re going to be doing compliance checks. Everybody be on your toes.’”

On two separate occasions, the SCSO came through area bars and restaurants with an underage decoy, who attempted to purchase alcohol.

Employees at the Corral Bar, the Cowboy Bar, Rock Rabbit and Country Lane Liquors served the minor, resulting in a citation for the employee. And contrary to reports, Stockman’s Restaurant and Lounge was not one that received a citation.

“The sheriff’s department, they were just doing their job,” said Dan Abernathy, owner of Rock Rabbit. “We were informed, and told our wait staff what to do. And we accept the responsibility.”

Others weren’t so acquiescent to the SCSO’s operation.

“It’s kind of an entrapment, because there is nobody who has a liquor license that is going to sell to a minor,” said Charlie Golden, owner of the Cowboy Bar. “If they are (bringing in a minor), they are intently trying to break the law. It’s premeditated.”

At Pinedale’s Town Council meeting last Monday evening, Kathy Anderson, the Treatment Court Coordinator for the county, asked the council to impose some form of reprisal on the businesses where the violations occurred.

Since the liquor licenses of all businesses are renewed on April 1 every year, the council momentarily entertained the idea, though the members ultimately voted to renew all licenses.

Anderson spoke specifically of the TIPS program as a potential requirement for all employees of these establishments.

“(TIPS is) a program that’s funded through the Department of Revenue’s liquor division to train people each year,” said Mark Mozer, the executive director of the Wyoming State Liquor Association. “Our goal is to enable everybody in the industry in Wyoming to be trained free of charge.”

Most owners were not supportive of any potential mandates for such training, particularly since many employees had already undergone the training voluntarily.

“We here are already TIPS-certified,” said Golden. Bozner echoed the same, saying, “I actually have three or four employees that are certified already.”

One of the difficulties of the TIPS program is that a local resource does not exist to provide the training to employees. Therefore, they must travel to another town, which costs employers time and money.

“You’ve got the distance they have to travel. I’ve got to pay them for the day. I’ve got to pay the overtime for employees to replace them,” said Mike Gilmore, owner of Country Lane Liquor. “And it’s just not feasible.”

Gilmore, who was in law enforcement for 11 years, understands the need of these operations, but any potential requirements are problematic, particularly since this is the first time in over six years that anyone at Country Lane has received such a citation.

“I’ve done these stings myself,” he said. “I’ve enforced the liquor laws, so I understand how they work and why they’re needed. But I don’t think the TIPS should be mandated.”

To ease the accessibility to the program, Mozer also pointed out the fact that by the end of April, the TIPS program will be available online, which would allow employees to take part in the three-hour class from any location with a computer.

And in early May, Mozer himself will be traveling to Pinedale to conduct a TIPS training class. “I welcome it to come in,” said Abernathy. “All of our servers, all of the owners, we’ll all be taking it.”

TIPS also has a program called “Train the Trainer,” which certifies personnel to then hold TIPS training for owners and employees of businesses that hold liquor licenses. And the SCSO is enrolling one of its officers in that program as well so that he, in turn, can be a local resource for anyone interested in receiving the training.

The bottom line for owners is that they were able to learn from the experience and improve their own business operations. And one thing they could agree on is that underage patrons are not welcomed in their establishment.

“I’m not upset about it at all,” said Abernathy. “It keeps us on our toes, and now, we card everybody.”

“It’s a good thing, because I definitely don’t condone selling to minors in the community,” said Gilmore.

“It never hurts to be checked and double checked,” said Bozner. “And I don’t know anybody who doesn’t want to be compliant.”

“I don’t want minors and I don’t need minors in here.”