

## WASHINGTON COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

Sheriff Fred Newman

## MEDIA RELEASE

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For More Information:

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Washington County Sheriff's Office Conducts Underage Alcohol Stings

The Washington County Virginia Sheriff's Office has recently completed an operation to thwart underage alcohol purchases. According to Washington County Sheriff Fred Newman, "In February of this year, detectives from our Criminal Investigation Division began to conduct sting operations at county businesses that sell alcoholic beverages for off-premise consumption."

The Sheriff's Office was awarded a \$5,000.00 grant from the U. S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. The money was used to allow detectives to conduct the sting operations during various hours and not be taken away from their assigned duties. The operation was worked in cooperation with the Commonwealth of Virginia Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC), and assistance was also given by Abingdon Police Department.

In Washington County Virginia there are currently fifty-eight (58) businesses categorized as: convenience stores, delicatessens, drug stores, gourmet shops, grocery stores, including the Virginia ABC store that sell alcoholic beverages for off-premise consumption, by the ABC. Of those fifty-eight (58) businesses, underage informants were able to successfully purchase alcohol from twelve (12) businesses. All of the transactions were observed, personally, by a Sheriff's detective inside the business at the time of the sale; and the purchased alcohol was immediately turned over to a waiting detective on the property outside the business. The

purchased alcohol was then stored as evidence, pending a court proceeding in Washington County General District Court.

The persons charged during the operation cited a variety of reasons to detectives when questioned about the sales. In some cases, detectives reported that they observed the cashier override the cash register's warning that the date of birth entered was invalid to complete the transaction. Other cashiers stated that they were either having a bad day or were trying to do the math of calculating the age of the buyer in their head. Each cashier who sold to the underage informant was charged under section §4.1-304 Persons to whom alcoholic beverages may not be sold; penalties, a class 1 misdemeanor offense. Some of those individuals charged have already been found guilty. A fine and court costs were imposed. Some cases have not been heard at this time. Additionally, the businesses at which these purchases were made could face administrative penalties from the ABC, which could result in fines or suspension of alcohol sales licenses.

Sheriff Newman stated that it is as equally important to recognize the diligence of local businesses that have policies and other measures in place to prevent under age purchases of alcohol, but ultimately the process relies upon the judgment of the employee. On eighty-two (82) occasions during this operation, an underage informant entered a business to purchase alcohol. To have only twelve (12) successful purchases (9.8%), indicates that, as a whole, businesses are taking steps necessary to prevent underage sale of alcoholic beverages.

The Washington County Sheriff's Office urges the public to assist in combating underage drinking in our area by reporting persons who supply alcohol to underage persons or by reporting locations where underage alcohol consumption is taking place. According to The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), each year approximately 5,000 young people under the age of 21 die as a result of underage drinking; this includes about 1,900 deaths from motor vehicle crashes, 1,600 as a result of homicides, 300 from suicide, as well as hundreds from other injuries such as falls, burns, and drowning (1–5). The National Crime Prevention Council reports that teens who consume alcohol are 7.5 times more likely to use illegal drugs.