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**PREVENTING UNDERAGE DRINKING THEME OF NATIONAL
ALCOHOL AWARENESS MONTH**

MONTGOMERY – When more than 60% of eighth graders say that alcohol is “fairly easy” or “very easy” to obtain, there is little wonder as to why the theme of this year’s National Alcohol Awareness month, held each April, is focused on preventing underage drinking. A national survey from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) provides this worrisome statistic, along with the fact that alcohol is the number one drug of choice for American children between the ages of 12 to 17.

For this reason, SAMHSA, along with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and Scholastic, Inc., have collaborated for a “Reach Out Now” campaign designed to encourage communities throughout the United States to focus on the problems associated with underage drinking. During the month of National Alcohol Awareness, providers will take the opportunity to collaborate with local school officials and classroom teachers to distribute information on “Understanding the Effects of Alcohol” and “Making Health Decisions.”

Research from The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) shows that alcohol is a leading factor in teen automobile crashes, suicides, and homicides—the three leading causes of teen deaths. In fact, alcohol-related car accidents are the number one cause of death for teenagers. According to the American Medical Association (AMA), alcohol (of any type) is a very dangerous drug and the health and social consequences of its use can be harmful to children in many ways. The brain goes through dynamic change during adolescence, and alcohol can interfere with its normal development. In school, adolescent drinkers have poor academic performance, score worse on vocabulary and memory retrieval tests, and have trouble recalling verbal information. Young people who drink have an increased risk of social problems, depression, suicidal thoughts, and strokes.

AMA research also found that underage drinking can be linked with early sexual activity, which is accompanied with an elevated risk of sexually transmitted diseases and

unintended pregnancies. Findings from the AAP go on to show that more than 43% of teenagers who began drinking before age 14 later became alcoholics.

“Alcohol Awareness Month is important because it reminds us that although alcohol is extremely socially accepted, it is still a mind altering drug that causes more societal problems than all the “illegal” drugs combined, said Kent Hunt, Alabama Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation Associate Commissioner for Substance Abuse Services. “Every parent should take time this month to examine the messages they are sending to their children regarding alcohol us. Alcohol should not be taken lightly just because it is a legal drug.”

The Alabama Department of Mental Health & Mental Retardation (DMHMR) was created in 1965 by Act No. 881 of the Alabama State Legislature. The DMHMR was charged with providing treatment and habilitation options for Alabamians with mental illness and mental retardation and later expanded to include options for Alabamians requiring substance abuse services. The DMH/MR contracts with a wide spectrum of certified community providers statewide, and serves more than 220,000 Alabamians each year. To find out more about the department, visit www.mh.alabama.gov.

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RESOURCES

Information on the “Reach Out Now” campaign can be found by visiting the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s Web site at www.samhsa.org.

To obtain more information about the American Academy of Pediatrics and other issues that affect children visit www.aap.org.

For more information on the American Medical Association visit www.ama-assn.org.