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Gov. Gary Herbert signs law that aims to curb hazing deaths

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SALT LAKE CITY — Clutching pictures of their brother and son, Michael Starks' family gathered around Utah Gov. Gary Herbert Wednesday as he ceremoniously signed legislation designed to prevent hazing deaths.

Starks, 18, died from alcohol poisoning in November 2008 after a fraternity initiation went wrong at Utah State University.

Now, his family is seeking to raise awareness of hazing problems in Utah, an effort that led to passage of two bills in the last legislative session that are designed to prevent similar tragedies.

Rep. Christine Johnson, D-Salt Lake City, sponsored HB277, which encourages people to call 911 if their friends overdose on drugs or alcohol. Under the new law, people who call 911 may face reduced sentences for underage drug use or underage alcohol consumption, Johnson said.

"We want to foster a friendlier environment for reporting such medical emergencies," she said.

A companion bill, Rep. Carol Spackman Moss' HB138, increases the penalty for drug- and alcohol-related hazing on college and university campuses.

The Holladay Democrat said the new law sends a message to young people across the state.

"We really want our young people to be educated, but along with education comes consequences," Moss said. "This law provides consequences to change behavior."

Under the law, the penalty for alcohol- or drug-related hazing increases from a class B misdemeanor to a class A misdemeanor, which could mean an additional six months of jail time and a heftier fine.

Michael Starks' father, George, said hazing is a national problem that affects Utah, as well.

"No state is immune to the problem of hazing," he said. "These laws help acknowledge that fact. We're not sweeping it under the rug anymore."

While George Starks said the laws are an important step in combating hazing, more reform is needed, including changes at individual colleges and universities.

"Schools need to recognize this is a problem and make policies that lessen the likelihood that this will happen in the future," he said.

Despite the continued challenge of increasing awareness among administrators and lawmakers, as well as students, Starks said he appreciated the work of Johnson and Moss, as well as Sen. Pat Jones, D-Holladay.

"We are very pleased with all the support we've received, and we're pleased that the governor signed these (laws)," he said.

At the signing ceremony, Herbert said the laws "bring awareness of the potential damage" caused by hazing.

"A lot of times, we're just ignorant," he said. "These are the kinds of things that we look back on and say, 'Gosh, that didn't need to happen.'"

Moss said the laws are needed precisely because hazing problems continue to occur.

"This really lets people know that this is a tradition that really shouldn't be," she said.

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