



January 2007

www.dwiresourcecenter.org

U.S. House Passes Underage Drinking Legislation

On December 7, 2006, in the final hours of the 109th Congress and nearly three years after its initial introduction, both houses of Congress passed the Sober Truth on Preventing (STOP) Underage Drinking Act (HR 864/S. 408).

The \$18 million bill will: establish a coordinated leadership role for the federal government to combat underage drinking via a Secretary-level Interagency Coordinating Committee; require an annual report to better monitor progress on key underage drinking indicators, and survey state underage drinking prevention policies and programs; authorize a national, adult-oriented media campaign to prevent underage drinking; make funds available to communities to combat youth alcohol use; and fund additional research on underage drinking.

The STOP Act was crafted by seven members of both parties in both houses of Congress and was inspired by the National Academies of Science's 2003 landmark report on reducing underage drinking, which detailed a comprehensive and ambitious agenda to address the problem. However, in order to improve the bill's hope of passage, it did not address some of that report's most important, but politically sensitive recommendations, including: a highly visible truly national-

scale paid federal media campaign to highlight the issue of underage drinking, higher beer taxes to deter youth consumption and fund prevention and treatment, and restrictions on alcohol advertising.

Nonetheless, it does represent modest progress and establishes a platform on which to build a real axis of programs and policies to address underage drinking. Significantly, the STOP Act calls for federal coordination of the many disparate underage drinking programs that are now carried out across many departments of government; it provides for better monitoring of alcohol promotion and advertising placement in the media and for better understanding of state activities to reduce underage drinking. It grants small amounts of funds for

Continued Inside

The DWI Resource Center is a 501(c)3 tax-exempt New Mexico organization formed to reduce the social and economic impact of DWI in New Mexico through public awareness, education, prevention programs and research. The Center also provides assistance to victims and serves as a central clearinghouse for information on DWI and victims' rights.

NONPROFIT
ORGANIZATION
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
ALB., NM
PERMIT # 1405

DWI
Resource Center, Inc.
P.O. Box 30514
Albuquerque, NM 87190-0514

additional community prevention activities and college prevention programs and expands the capacity of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism to conduct research on alcohol's effects on young brains and the impact of alcohol advertising on young people. It sows the seeds for a national media campaign on underage drinking prevention, though in the form of \$1 million public service announcement project developed '96 pro bono '96 by members of the Ad Council.

Especially essential to this win were the efforts of concerned organizations and individuals from around the country who helped recruit co-sponsors and keep the pressure on when that was needed.

Minimum Drinking Age Puts Parents in Control

Commentary

By Robert Voas, Ph.D.

While alcohol remains the No. 1 health risk to young people, research on youth drinking and driving has shown some positive news in the last two decades. Between 1982 and 1998, the population-weighted rate of drinking drivers younger than 21 in fatal crashes declined by an amazing 59 percent. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration gives most of the credit to the minimum legal drinking age law enacted by Congress in 1984. The law saves more than 900 lives a year.

Despite this good news, skeptics and prevention opponents continually attack the minimum drinking age. They point to the ease with which teens still obtain alcohol, the drunken parties in fraternity houses, the teen keg parties in the homes of absent parents and the deaths of prom night drivers.

While the minimum drinking age law is often violated, its shortcomings are not within the law itself but rather its enforcement. There's limited interest among adults in seeing the law fully enforced. This lack of concern creates

an environment in which merchants, who primarily focus on sales, are permitted to be sloppy in their efforts to prevent sales to minors. Taking time to check IDs can be a nuisance for managers and clerks, a diversion from the key activity of making a living. House parties hosted by a young adult are another major source of alcohol for minors. Some communities recognize this threat to public health and safety and have approved "social host" laws and enforcement, using hefty civil fines to deter adults from allowing minors to drink at their parties. But most communities just look the other way.

Studies show that when police have the resources and public support, they can substantially reduce minors' access to alcohol. When owners and managers of alcohol outlets are convinced that the drinking age is being actively enforced, they tighten up on age checking and substantially reduce alcohol availability to youths. Cracking down on underage drinking at house parties has borne similar successes.

Few parents welcome the sight of a drunken teenager, but, particularly with boys, adults treat this as an inevitable right of passage, a temporary, ultimately unimportant occurrence on the way to adulthood. Even when parents are disturbed that their teen is drinking, they feel powerless to control the problem because their son or daughter has access to alcohol from peers, parties and illegal sales.

Whether by failure to take the problem seriously or out of frustration, society tends to dismiss underage drinking. It's even the source of humor in popular culture, just as impaired driving used to be in the 1970s – until the advent of citizen activist groups such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving. We need a new wave of activism focused on underage drinking to motivate parents to support minimum drinking age enforcement in their communities. Once that happens, it will become a priority for police and policy-makers.

Parents need to be educated on the data about how underage drinking leads to death, injuries, school problems, teen pregnancy, sexual assault on teen girls, juvenile crime, damage to the developing adolescent brain and the onset of adult drinking problems. This knowledge can be wielded by communities to demand the reduction of alcohol availability to youths. That, in turn, will empower parents to take control of their teenagers' drinking decisions. Despite the belief by many parents that teen drinking is beyond their control, they have the power to protect their sons and daughters through strong support for minimum drinking age enforcement.

Robert Voas, a senior research scientist for PIRE Public Services Research Institute, has studied alcohol-related problems and solutions for more than 30 years.

Hiring A New Employee? Check out their DWI record online!

A DWI on an employee's record can be an indicator of alcohol & drug-related problems, lack of personal responsibility, and poor decision-making skills. Check your employees' records before you hire! The DWI Resource Center offers employers a free online DWI offender database, containing records from the last five years. Check your employees' records today by visiting our website:

<http://www.dwiresourcecenter.org>