

Midlands Voices: Let's send the right message to youths about alcohol use

Written by
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On May 1, The World-Herald published an editorial, "Nebraska needs to keep up its efforts to combat binge drinking." The editorial outlined the struggle Nebraskans, specifically youth, are facing with binge drinking given we are the fifth-worst state in the country in that category, according to the Centers for Disease Control, leading to alcohol-related fatal and injury crashes, violence, crime, sexually transmitted diseases, unintended pregnancies and certain cancers.

While the information presented was informative, the editorial concluded "Nebraska households and institutions need to keep delivering the all-important message to young people about the harm from irresponsible alcohol use." So let's take a closer look at what message our community sends to youth on alcohol.

While other states have restricted the availability of alcohol to protect public health and safety, it is widely available throughout our state. Alcohol is sold in gas stations across the state despite Nebraska having the second-worst alcohol-impaired driving rate in the country. It's available at grocery stores and businesses you wouldn't typically associate with alcohol consumption, such as nail salons, barber shops, spas, bicycle tour companies and landscaping companies, bringing the current total number of licenses in the state to over 6,100. Since 2010, the number of businesses licensed to sell alcohol in our state has grown at a rate two times that of our population.

Alcohol is being prominently featured at all kinds of events. Within the last month, "Bugs and Bourbon," "Breathe and Brew" and "Brew at the Zoo" have been publicized by media. The College World Series began allowing the sale of alcohol recently without any real debate or public input. We've also seen alcohol play a prominent role in fundraising for cancer research, even though it is known to cause at least seven types of cancer in the human body, including cancer of the female breast.

Every day our kids are inundated by alcohol advertising, much of which directly targets them on television, radio and billboards along our highways. The federal and state regulations related to alcohol advertising are almost non-existent. Companies are allowed to self-regulate and, even then, they can't even follow their own rules.

These circumstances have led to a host of alcohol-related harms, including an estimated 703 alcohol-related deaths in 2015, according to the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services and annual economic costs in excess of \$1.1 billion of which \$491 million were paid by taxpayers.

Education and awareness are a piece of the prevention puzzle, but they must be supported by evidence-based strategies. One such strategy is to increase alcohol taxes, but when that was proposed this year in the Legislature, a number of editorial boards joined the alcohol industry in criticizing the proposal. However, it is not too late to reverse course. Raising these taxes could bring in new revenue while reducing the harms outlined and have a negligible impact on the craft beer industry, as evidenced by increases in Illinois in 2009 and Maryland in 2011. Other evidence-based strategies include regulating outlet density, enacting full dram shop laws and enforcing underage drinking laws. It's time for communities and our elected officials to step up and confront this problem in more effective ways.