

SAMPLE OP-ED ARTICLE

Our Tolerance for Underage Drinking Must Be Zero

by Jane Smith, Executive Director, The _____ Coalition

For only the third time in the last 14 years, alcohol-related motor vehicle fatalities involving youth (ages 15 through 20) increased, despite a decrease in those fatalities for all other age groups. In addition, after 11 years of steady decline, the number of high school seniors who report daily drinking has increased the last four years in a row.

When confronted with these figures, many adults look confused. “Haven’t we won that battle? Don’t most kids understand the dangers, particularly of drinking and driving?” The answer is NO. The battle to reduce the serious consequences of underage drinking is a long term campaign that requires a unified, community approach.

The _____ Coalition is making headway because it views the problem of underage drinking from multiple perspectives: education for youth and adults, tougher enforcement and stronger laws and regulations.

One of the most effective tools in the fight to prevent underage drinking is zero tolerance. A zero tolerance law makes it illegal per se (in and of itself) for anyone under the age of 21 to drive with any measurable amount of alcohol in their blood.

In most states, blood alcohol levels (BAC) of .08 or .10 signify driving under the influence or driving while intoxicated for adults. In recognition of the seriousness of youthful drinking and driving, however, all 50 states and the District of Columbia have established zero tolerance levels for underage drivers. (Some of the states enacted the .01 or .02 BAC to allow for variation in alcohol testing instruments and for the possible ingestion of any substance which is not an alcoholic beverage but could cause a slight increase in BAC.)

An effective zero tolerance law must allow a police officer to require a breath test from a driver under age 21 if the officer has probable cause to believe the driver has been drinking. If the youthful driver refuses the test or the test reveals a BAC in violation of the law, then the driver should be subject to sanctions, including the loss or suspension of his or her driver’s license. The zero tolerance approach is certainly strict, but it is also potentially life-saving. We should have both the courage and the resolve to implement it in our state.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration evaluated the effects of Maryland’s .02 law. The study revealed an 11 percent decrease in the number of drivers under age 21 who were involved in crashes and had, according to the police report, “been drinking.”

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A study of four other zero tolerance states (New Mexico, North Carolina, Maine and Wisconsin) revealed a 34 percent decline in adolescent fatal crashes at night during the years after the law was implemented, compared to only a seven percent decrease in fatal adult crashes at night. States with the lower BAC limits also demonstrated a 16 percent decrease in single vehicle nighttime fatal crashes among underage drivers, while the same kind of crashes rose one percent among drivers of the same ages when compared with drivers among the same age group in other states where the laws remained unchanged.

Understanding the nature of youthful drinking helps to clarify one of the reasons why zero tolerance is so important. When young people drink, most of them drink for the “buzz” and the peer acceptance, not the taste. Appallingly, more than three-quarters of high school seniors drink alcohol and about one-third are “binge” drinkers, which means they consume five or more drinks on one occasion. If teens begin to drink, many of them will become intoxicated. We must, therefore, prevent them from drinking at all, but that requires commitment from the entire community — legislators, enforcement officials, the judiciary and all of the other adults who shape the environment in which our young people live. Passing and enforcing the zero tolerance law is one of the ways we adults can show that we really care.