

## Local View: To-go cocktails must go

Written by Chris Wagner

In response to a nationwide push by the alcohol industry to cement temporary policy changes and secure profits long after the pandemic has subsided, a number of bills have been introduced in the Legislature to do just that. If adopted, their impact will lead to significant increases in alcohol access and availability across the state. Research consistently shows that as availability increases, so do a variety of health and social problems.

It is fair to say that – perhaps now more than ever – the general public truly appreciates the importance of public health and taking preventive measures to mitigate harms for both ourselves and our neighbors due to COVID-19. So why would we embrace CDC recommendations on mask-wearing and social distancing but ignore its recommendations on strengthening alcohol policies?

It is understandable that elected officials would move to provide temporary waivers to an industry that has been impacted by the pandemic. What does not make sense is extending those waivers beyond the time at which the governor determines that a state of emergency no longer exists. Doing so would completely ignore the socioeconomic harms that our state experiences because of excessive alcohol consumption.

This is particularly relevant given that Nebraska ranks among the worst states in the country for its rates of binge drinking (fifth worst in the country) and self-reported drunk driving (second worst in the country). Alcohol-related harms to individuals and communities are on the rise. As progress has stalled, deaths due to alcohol have doubled over the last two decades. Excessive alcohol use now contributes to more than 95,000 deaths a year nationally and according to a state epidemiological report, 703 deaths in Nebraska during 2015 alone.

The Journal Star Editorial Board's comments on recent decreases in DUI arrests are misleading and their matter-of-fact tone shocking ("It's time for cocktails to go to become permanently legal," Jan. 21). The Nebraska State Patrol acknowledged in a Jan. 4 Omaha World-Herald article that a reduction in traffic and other COVID-19 impacts may have contributed to the decrease. We do not yet know the full impact of these weakened alcohol policies in Nebraska, but we can say with certainty that they do not follow the evidence-based recommendations of multiple public health organizations.

In fact, the CDC recommends that communities support evidence-based prevention of excessive drinking and that "greater availability and accessibility of alcohol is linked with excessive alcohol drinking. Many states and communities are providing additional options for delivery and takeaway of alcoholic beverages. The Community Preventive Services Task Force recommends limiting the availability of alcohol to lower excessive alcohol use and its impacts."

Allowing cocktails to-go presents challenges to ensuring that alcohol does not end up in the hands of those who should not be served. It adds to the confusion around our state's open container law, and it places an additional burden on law enforcement to ensure that drinks are being properly transported home.

Permanent expansion of cocktails to-go will substantially increase the number of businesses that can offer off-site consumption in a state already awash with liquor licenses. More than 3,200 active Class C and Class I liquor licenses would benefit. Large gaps in available resources for law enforcement to ensure compliance with liquor laws will further impede communities' ability to adhere to any changes to the law.

Alcohol is the No. 1 drug problem in Nebraska. Our collective response to one public health crisis should not weaken the very policies that are in place to prevent another. There is too much at stake.