

Local View: Alcohol costly to community

Written by Chris Wagner

You can buy alcohol pretty much anywhere in our state nowadays, including conventional retail outlets like bars and restaurants; questionable locations like grocery stores; and mind-boggling spots like gas stations (we have the second-worst DUI rate in the country), shopping malls, nail salons, shooting ranges, axe-throwing businesses and now furniture stores. When is enough enough?

The mistake would be thinking that local communities make the final call on these decisions. Regulators and policymakers in Lincoln have an outsized impact on what happens in neighborhoods across the state when it comes to alcohol.

The problem with having alcohol available pretty much everywhere is that it increases excessive consumption and its harms, including but not limited to motor vehicle crashes, sexual assaults, domestic violence, alcohol poisoning, sexually transmitted diseases, birth defects and at least seven types of cancer along with other health issues.

Increased convenience also exacerbates these problems, yet the number of businesses offering alcohol delivery in our state continues to grow.

Nebraska ranks as the fifth-worst binge-drinking state, with 21.2% of adults binge drinking (up from 20.6% in 2017), with two communities – Lincoln and Omaha -- ranking among the 25 worst binge-drinking cities. Nebraska high school students also report drinking in the last 30 days (24.4%) and binge drinking (10.5%).

Increasing the availability and presence of alcohol in these settings sends the wrong message to youth. Rather than making it more visible and available, evidence-based policies are needed to reduce the aforementioned harms.

I followed debate at the Legislature in 2015 when a Good Samaritan law was being considered. That bill limited liability for persons who contact and cooperate with first responders in order to aid a person overdosing on alcohol or another drug.

Multiple senators declared that if the measure only saves one life then passing the bill was worth it. Yet when evidence-based legislation is introduced that would potentially save hundreds of lives – alcohol taxes, alcohol impact zones, increased penalties for businesses that are repeat offenders were all introduced in 2019 – those measures rarely make it to General File for debate because of industry pressure.

Take, for example, alcohol taxes. According to a study published in the American Journal of Public Health, doubling the alcohol tax would reduce alcohol-related mortality by an average of 35%. Our state had an estimated 703 alcohol-related deaths in 2015 alone, according to the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services. Had our taxes been twice as high that year, we could have saved an estimated 246 lives.

LB592 would have simply given the Nebraska Liquor Control Commission the discretion to impose mandatory days of closure for businesses that repeatedly break the law. That didn't stop

the industry from claiming the Commission would overreach with this power in order to shutdown retailers for failing to display their liquor license or being late with their renewal applications, which is comical to anyone remotely familiar with the Liquor Control Commission and how it operates.

Nevertheless, the bill language was completely gutted by the General Affairs Committee and the language from LB584, a bill expanding alcohol availability, was inserted. Because the original bill had been prioritized by the committee, it was put on the fast-track for approval and signed by the governor six weeks later.

Until we elevate the public interest over special interests by basing our decisions on research over industry scaremongering, our state is going to continue to lose innocent lives and suffer the social and economic costs from our industry-friendly policies.