

Local View: Alcohol isn't a silver bullet

Written by Chris Wagner

Nebraska is the fifth-worst binge drinking state in the country according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – a statistic supported by the United Health Foundation's annual America's Health Rankings.

The CDC also identifies the city of Lincoln as the fourth-worst binge drinking city in the country. As a result, our state has some of the highest alcohol-related harms, including being the second-worst state for self-reported drinking and driving with 955 episodes per 1,000 population, a figure nearly twice the national average of 505.

Despite this, discussions are occurring to allow alcohol sales at Memorial Stadium, a move that will surely cement these rankings for many years to come.

COVID-19 has complicated our lives over the last month, and, based on Gov. Pete Ricketts' recent comments, that will continue for at least another month. These are difficult times that have negatively impacted a growing number of individuals, businesses and organizations, forcing Americans to face uncertain futures, including the University of Nebraska.

Shortly after his hiring as the UNL athletic director in 2017, Bill Moos was on record saying that Nebraska had no need for alcohol sales at Memorial Stadium, mostly due to our consecutive sellout streak – currently at 375 games.

The idea of adding alcohol sales resurfaced last week in response to the coronavirus and its economic impacts. In a column by Steven Sipple headlined "With economic concerns growing, Moos ramps up consideration of alcohol at Memorial Stadium," Moos suggests alcohol is one option that ought to be considered to make up for potential lost revenue.

On its face, it sounds like it could work. However, once one digs deeper into the substantial scientific research out there about how excessive alcohol consumption leads to increased rape, violence, impaired driving and cancer among other things, it begins to look like a very short-sighted view that completely ignores the harms that will be created in the community and paid for by taxpayers.

In its Sunday editorial on the topic, the Journal Star seemed only to be concerned with the University of Nebraska's lost revenue stream should the coronavirus epidemic not be resolved in time for football season.

The editorial board was eager to dismiss any harms as "perceived" unless those harms are measured in terms of lost alcohol sales at local restaurants and bars around the stadium. The arguments in favor of adding alcohol sales haven't changed, but now proponents are claiming the need is urgent due to the virus, despite no indication as to how it will impact college sports next fall.

On the contrary, the harms of alcohol in our state are real and measurable. The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services noted in its 2017 epidemiological survey that alcohol was the sixth-most common cause of death in 2015 due to an estimated 703 alcohol-related deaths, 83 of which occurred on our roads according to NDOT Highway Safety Office statistics.

In addition, research shows that Nebraska has approximately \$1.2 billion in annual economic costs due to excessive alcohol consumption – \$491 million of which are paid for by Nebraska taxpayers.

So what does this have to do with alcohol sales to adults in Memorial Stadium and other venues that host college sports? Access matters. The best way to prevent underage and binge drinking and the harms that follow is to limit the availability of alcohol.

Right now, we have the best policy on this: Alcohol sales are not allowed. This policy needs to continue according to a 2007 report by U.S. Surgeon General and a 2012 report by the Task Force of the National Advisory Council on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. Both reports recommend restricting the sale of alcohol on campus and at facilities such as stadiums and arenas.

The University of Nebraska should be particularly interested in preventing alcohol-related harms given college drinking data collected by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

According to NIAAA, about 1,825 college students between the ages of 18 and 24 die each year from alcohol-related unintentional injuries that include motor-vehicle crashes. Furthermore, 696,000 of college students are assaulted by a student who had been drinking, while 97,000 students experienced alcohol-related sexual assaults or date rape. Based on all the evidence, we urge the university to keep alcohol out of sports venues and off campus.

Let's do everything we can to ensure the health and safety of our students and communities.