



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
DEPARTMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTION SERVICES
A Healthcare Service Agency

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Testimony of Thomas A. Kirk, Jr., Ph.D., Commissioner
Department of Mental Health & Addiction Services
Before the Judiciary Committee
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Good afternoon, Sen. McDonald, Rep. Lawlor, and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee. I am Dr. Thomas A. Kirk, Commissioner of the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, and I am here this afternoon to speak in favor of **H.B. 5211, An Act Concerning Underage Drinking**.

Underage drinking is a serious problem nationwide, as well as here in Connecticut. Our Prevention Unit devotes a great deal of time and resources trying to address the issues surrounding underage drinking. There are a number of federal and state indicators that we think are interesting and would go a long way toward giving you support in our effort to tackle this problem.

Among the considerable consequences associated with underage alcohol consumption:

- Heavy drinkers are at increased risk for alcohol abuse and dependence. People who begin drinking before the age of 15 are four times more likely to develop alcohol dependence than those who wait until age 21. Each additional year that the onset of drinking is delayed by underage youths reduces the probability of alcohol dependence by 14 percent.
- Binge drinking, as indicated by the consumption of five or more drinks within a short time span, is strongly associated with injuries, motor vehicle crashes, violence, fetal alcohol syndrome, chronic liver disease, and several other chronic and acute conditions.
- Initiation of alcohol use at young ages has been linked to more problematic levels of use in adolescence and adulthood. Young people who drink are more likely than adults to be binge drinkers.

A 2004 National Survey on Drug Use and Health found that:

1. Roughly 10.8 million underage persons aged 12 to 20 (28.7 percent) reported current alcohol use;
2. 2.4 million (6.3 percent) were heavy drinkers, who binge five or more times per month;

3. Of the 10.8 million underage drinkers, 4.4 million (almost half) were youths aged 12-17;
4. Approximately 11.1 percent of 12-year-olds reported having used alcohol at least once in their lifetimes;
5. By the age of 13, the percentage who have used alcohol doubles (roughly a quarter of youths), and by age 15, the figure is over 50 percent.

A 2004 CORE Survey of CT College Campuses found that:

1. 72% of college students reported that they were current drinkers and 46% had been binge drinking within the past two weeks
2. 30% of students admitted that they had driven a vehicle while under the influence of alcohol or other substance use.

And the 2000 Governor's Prevention Initiative for Youth found:

1. 24% of 7th-8th graders and 46% of 9th-10th graders had used alcohol in the previous month.
2. The average age of first alcohol use by 8th grade drinkers was 11.

A number of initiatives have been undertaken to tackle this problem:

1. State partners are poised to strengthen efforts statewide using data, evidence-based practices;
2. A statewide infrastructure exists to mobilize stakeholders at the state, regional and local levels;
3. Federal funds exist within each state agency to address this problem; and
4. Two major Governor's initiatives currently focus on underage alcohol use prevention – i.e., the Governor's Campus Partnership and the CT Strategic Prevention Framework State Incentive Grant (SPF SIG).

Some evidence-based environmental strategies to reduce underage drinking include: Social host laws; keg registration ordinances; happy hour restrictions; reducing the density of alcohol outlets, limiting access at sporting and community events; compliance checks; incentives to decrease access and availability of alcohol; responsible beverage service; graduated drivers' license laws; and sobriety checkpoints.

With regard to social host laws, parents sometimes host drinking parties for underage youth in an attempt to protect their children by providing a “supervised environment.” In fact, adults are the most common source of alcohol for underage drinkers, and one in four teens has seen their peers drink alcohol in front of parents at a party (**AMA, 2005**). Social host laws hold non-commercial servers of alcohol – such as homeowners or parents – liable in the event that they provide alcohol to a minor or an obviously inebriated individual who subsequently becomes involved in an accident that causes injury or death to a third party (**MADD, Social Host**). A national study found that social host liability laws lowered the probability of binge drinking and drinking and driving among all drinkers (**Stout et al, 2000**). The recommendations contained in H.B. 5211 are consistent with the findings relative to social host laws.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak in support of the efforts outlined in this legislation, and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.