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Putting Caps on Teenage Drinking

By Jim Gogek

A year ago, at the request of Congress, the National Academy of Sciences issued a nationwide strategy to reduce underage drinking. It hasn't been adopted, and since then more than 3,000 Americans have been killed and nearly 1 million injured in traffic crashes, shootings, stabbings, beatings, drownings, burns, suicide attempts and alcohol poisonings -- all linked to underage drinking.

And there have been more than 1.1 million property crimes and nearly 400,000 incidents of high-risk sex among youths, according to research conducted over the years by our institute.

This week, nearly 1,000 prevention advocates and alcohol law enforcement officers are meeting at a conference in San Diego to promote the recommendations from the National Academy report. But despite their dedication to the cause, they probably won't succeed -- without a lot more help from Washington. A few federal agencies have taken small steps, and two pieces of legislation have been developed but sit languishing. Lawmakers may be too preoccupied right now to tackle a thorny social problem. And the power of the alcohol lobby makes everybody in Washington skittish.

To do so little in the face of this preventable death and injury toll -- particularly when the victims are children -- is astonishing. The report provided specific proposals, from a national media campaign and the establishment of an independent prevention foundation, to curbs on alcohol advertising and increased enforcement to stop sales to minors. So far, the federal government has set up an interagency committee that's supposed to send a report to Congress later this year on what to do about underage drinking. Without real political commitment, that report -- like the National Academy study -- will be ignored.

The two underage drinking bills won't move any time soon. The more comprehensive one, introduced in July, is utterly underwhelming: it would provide a paltry \$19 million to combat a problem that costs the nation about \$62 billion a year. The financing is for research, prevention projects and support for the interagency committee. The bill also includes a one-time appropriation of \$1 million for a national media campaign. Compare that to the federal youth antidrug media campaign, which in fiscal year 2005 alone will receive \$145 million. All told, the

federal government spends 25 times more on illegal drug abuse prevention than on underage drinking prevention, despite the fact that alcohol kills six times more youths than all other drugs combined.

The other bill focuses on only one facet of prevention -- the illegal purchase of alcohol. It would help bars and liquor stores buy new technology that can detect fake ID's and would finance state alcohol law enforcement departments so they can do their jobs. This bill doesn't have a sponsor yet.

Meanwhile, advocates in community coalitions and in some government agencies are being pushed backward. Underage drinking prevention groups have had their grants reduced or eliminated by strapped state and local governments. A federally financed information system to track state alcohol laws and policies faces significant cuts. Alcohol law enforcement departments, chronically underfinanced and understaffed, have been hit by budget cuts in many states. Maine decided to get rid of its department altogether, leaving liquor law enforcement there in chaos.

As the history of tobacco control demonstrates, when the government fails to address a serious social and health problem, trial lawyers step in. In the last nine months, class-action lawsuits have been filed against alcohol producers by major law firms in the District of Columbia, California, Colorado and North Carolina, among other states. These suits, similar to those filed against the tobacco industry in the 1990's, allege that the alcohol industry unjustly profits from what they term unfair and deceptive marketing practices aimed at underage drinkers. The failure by Congress and the Federal Trade Commission to address industry marketing tactics has left the door open for litigation.

Bold government initiatives can be effective. This summer, we're celebrating the 20th anniversary of the minimum drinking age of 21, signed into law by President Ronald Reagan in 1984. That legislation has saved an estimated 20,000 lives. An adequately financed, nationwide plan to reduce underage drinking, adhering to the National Academy report, would save even more lives. But so far, it looks like underage drinking will only be fought by impoverished advocacy groups, a scattering of state officials and trial lawyers who see the story of tobacco litigation about to repeat itself.

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