



Gibbons Capitol Report
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New Approaches to Curb Underage Drinking

This week I wrapped up a statewide tour of underage drinking roundtables. In 2005, we were successful in creating new tools to combat underage drinking. The new law took effect last fall and I wanted to meet and hear directly from the people in Missouri who work every day with these new laws to help curb underage drinking.

A Seat at the Table

Joined by area senators, I sat down with students, parents, law enforcement, prosecutors, educators and community advocates to see if our new law is having an impact on helping minors say no to alcohol. It was incredible to bring together this broad range of people and hear how they have been using the current law and what further tools they need to help.

What We Passed

We heard great feedback on Senate Bill 402, the bill we passed that changed misdemeanor penalties to address both the possession and consumption of alcohol by minors. Under the act, a minor can now be found guilty of a "minor in possession" if he or she is visibly intoxicated or has a blood alcohol content of more than .02. Any minor found guilty of a "minor in possession" can now lose their driver's license for 30 days for a first offense. The measure also prohibits adults from allowing minors to drink on their private property, even if they didn't provide the alcohol for the minors. Resoundingly, everyone said these two changes were a huge first step.

Recommendations

But more can be done. At each of the nine roundtables we hosting at the state's regional highway patrol headquarters, new and different ideas were presented. In Greene County they have had great success through their prosecutor's office by offering first time offenders an alcohol assessment so students can learn early if they have a problem with drinking and where to get help. Students with SADD told us they needed more activities to offer to students after school and on weekends to give students a choice to attend parties without alcohol. In Jefferson City a state trooper told us students are looking for a good reason to say no to underage drinking, and whether it's losing their driver's license or getting benched in sports, these reasons give students the ability to say no and still be considered "cool." Law enforcement and prosecutors were open to the idea of making the

driver's license revocation an administrative action, just as it is for a DWI. Everyone agreed that consistency of punishment was more important than the severity. In St. Louis, advocates thought more focus should be placed on education prevention, while in rural parts of the state, law enforcement said more Alcohol and Tobacco Control staff would help immensely. Schools across the state have adopted policies to deal with students who are caught drinking, and in St. Joseph they are currently creating an educational program for students to participate in that are suspended from school for drinking. Other ideas include making the "MINOR" determination on driver's licenses bigger and brighter, so less illegal sales of alcohol will take place. And prospective drivers may soon have to answer questions about the consequences of underage drinking when taking their driver's examination.

These ideas will help us take the next step to protect our children. I want to thank all of the participants who traveled to take part in these roundtables. I'm glad I had the opportunity to sit and listen to what these groups feel are the most important next steps lead us in the right direction. I will be filing a bill for the 2007 legislative session using their recommendations as the cornerstone. Together, we are building on our successes and making sure the provisions we passed, coupled with these new ideas, work properly to protect our children.