



Gibbons Capitol Report
January 18, 2008

Combating Underage Drinking

Ryan McElhaney is a youth prevention specialist with Tri-County Mental Health Services. She says underage drinking is a huge problem in Missouri and she's right. Surveys from 2004 show that four out of five high school students have tried alcohol. Even more alarming, one in three students admits to being a binge drinker. We created new tools in 2005 to help curb this growing epidemic, but those on the front line like Ryan are telling are new challenges facing our students.

Outlawing AWOL Devices

I'm supporting Sen. Luann Ridgeway's Senate Bill 747 that sets out to provide even more tools to help students say no to underage drinking. The crux of the bill prohibits the possession and use of an alcoholic beverage vaporizer, a device that allows a person to feel the effects of alcohol at a rapid rate by converting hard liquor into a mist that can be inhaled. Inhalation speeds up the rate of intoxication by bypassing the stomach and liver and going directly into the bloodstream. Ryan works in classrooms and says the AWOL (Alcohol Without Liquid) device is harmful because it gives youth another reason to experiment with alcohol. She said last year she only had one or two students in a classroom who knew what an AWOL device is. Unfortunately, she says now more than 50 percent have heard of it.

Penalties for Repeat MIPs

Another aspect of the bill would bar minors charged with three minor in possession violations from receiving educational cost reimbursement under the "A+ Schools Program," an incentive program that helps Missouri students pay for college. Many school districts that we've worked with told us they already take this action because part of being an A+ scholar recipient is being a good citizen.

Parents Should Be Responsible, Too

The legislation would also hold those who provide alcohol to minors or knowingly allow minors to drink on their property accountable to the minor's parent or guardian if the minor suffers an injury or harm as a result. In 2005 we made it so parents are held responsible if they host house parties. This goes one step further to hold parent's responsible if a minor is harmed. As we all know too well, bad decisions that can put our children's well-being in harm can happen if they drink underage.

I commend Sen. Ridgeway's commitment to outlawing alcohol vaporizers in Missouri, as well as sponsoring legislation that creates even more tools to combat underage drinking. We've worked with students, parents, law enforcement and advocates from across the state to learn what they need to help them be more successful in preventing students from drinking, and these changes are what they need. The bill has already been heard in committee, and thanks to support from advocates like Ryan, I believe it will move forward swiftly.