

Omaha nonprofit speaks against LB258

Written by John Chapman

OMAHA, Neb. (WOWT) - Over the last decade, officials with Project Extra Mile noticed a decrease in the number of underage youth getting caught up in alcohol use. Now, they say the pandemic has reversed that trend.

"Since the pandemic, it's really increased because of isolation and not having school, boredom, so it's going back up," said Chris Wagner, Project Extra Mile's executive director.

Wagner is concerned those numbers could continue climbing if LB258 becomes law.

Nebraska Sen. John Lowe of Kearney introduced the bill. LB258 is not very complicated in its wording. It simply strikes "near beer" from the list of what the state considers to be beer -- essentially deregulating what the state already regulates.

"[It will] make it just like water or soda, and would allow kids of all ages to purchase that," Wagner said. "We're really concerned that that's going to lead youth to get a taste for alcohol and for beer and wanting to purchase that product, and getting their hands on it before they're the legal age of 21."

"Near beer" is beer with .5% alcohol-by-volume -- a very low alcohol content.

Members of the Nebraska Liquor Control Commission asked the governor and state lawmakers, in addition to near-beer, to give the commission the authority to regulate non-alcoholic spirits and wine because of their increasing popularity.

Wagner says deregulating near-beer would send a mixed message, because in the state of Nebraska, it's illegal for anyone under age to consume any alcohol.

"We have a zero-tolerance law in Nebraska, so if these youth were to drink enough to exceed that .02 [blood alcohol level] limit, then drive and get pulled over, they'd be in violation of the law," Wagner said.

Wagner says Project Extra Mile agrees with the Liquor Control Commission that near-beer, low-alcohol spirits and wines should all be regulated by the state.

"Anything that looks like alcohol, tastes like alcohol, smells like alcohol, ought to be treated like alcohol," Wagner said.

6 News reached out to Sen. Lowe's office for comment on his bill. We have not heard back.