

Local View: Awareness not enough

Written by Chris Wagner

April was Alcohol Awareness Month, but what do Nebraskans know about excessive alcohol consumption, its impact on our health and its impact on the health and safety of our neighborhoods?

For starters, we know that Nebraska is consistently one of the worst states for binge drinking (drinking four or more drinks for women and five or more for men on an occasion). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [we are currently the seventh-worst binge drinking state in the country](#) (19.3%). This is consequential because binge drinking is responsible for a significant percentage of the harms we experience as a state.

One of those harms is cancer, which is why the state's most recent comprehensive cancer control plan [prioritized achieving a 2% reduction in our adult binge drinking rate by June 2021](#) (from 19.5 to 17.5%). Unfortunately, we did not achieve that objective. Truthfully, we didn't even come close.

Our binge drinking rate peaked in 2018 at 21.2% and has been slowly declining since then. A majority of Americans are also unaware that [alcohol causes at least seven types of cancer in humans](#): breast, colon and rectum, esophagus, mouth, throat, and voice box. In Nebraska, alcohol is responsible for an [estimated 112 cancer deaths and 1,715 years of potential life lost each year](#).

However, alcohol-related cancer deaths only account for 11% of our estimated annual deaths (1,001) due to excessive alcohol consumption (binge drinking, underage drinking, heavy drinking, drinking by pregnant women). Alcoholic liver disease (235 deaths), heart disease and stroke (226), motor vehicle crashes (75) and suicide (59) make up the top five categories and all of these deaths can be prevented.

Excessive alcohol consumption also presents a huge economic burden for those who live and do business in our state. Our economic costs (lost work productivity; increased health care, corrections and law enforcement costs) amount to [nearly \\$1.2 billion each year](#), nearly \$500 million of which are borne by Nebraska taxpayers. Nebraskans are essentially subsidizing the reckless behavior of a fraction of our population.

Raising awareness during April and throughout the year can be important. People need to understand the issue, but increased awareness isn't the answer to this complicated problem.

Bars aren't going to stop serving to intoxicated customers because they read this article; the University of Nebraska isn't going to suddenly reverse course and stop their march toward alcohol sales at university events (we already shared this information with the Board of Regents on multiple occasions); and alcohol-related crime is unlikely to see any decline following the publication of this piece.

There is, however, a path forward. The [World Health Organization](#) recommends several cost-effective strategies for governments to prevent these harms and their costs, including placing restrictions on alcohol advertising, restricting the availability of alcohol and increasing the price of alcohol.

The Nebraska Legislature recently passed an interim study (LR353) to look at the pricing and taxation of alcohol in Nebraska as the result of the advocacy of middle and high school students

in the Omaha area. This is an important first step because the scientific literature demonstrates how effective pricing strategies can be.

For example, [Maryland implemented a 3% alcohol sales tax](#) in 2011. Within five years, Maryland saw a 17% decrease in adult binge drinking and a 26% reduction in high school youth alcohol consumption along with a 28% reduction in youth binge drinking. It also led to a [significant gradual annual reduction of 6% in the population-based rate of all alcohol-positive drivers](#) and a 12% reduction for drivers aged 15-20 years and 21-34 years.

It is not hard to imagine how an alcohol sales tax, or an increase in the existing alcohol excise tax, could make Nebraska a healthier and safer place for all.

Our news headlines are awash in drunk driving crashes. In the last two weeks, there were two crashes that resulted in death. [A crash on I-80 cost two innocent people their lives due to a drunk driver going the wrong way.](#) [While in Lincoln, a single, drunk, rollover crash left two of the passengers dead at the scene.](#) Awareness is an important first step, but now more than ever we need action.