

**OMAHA COALITION MEETING**  
**Wednesday, March 13, 2024**  
**9 a.m.**

Please use to sign-in:



## **A G E N D A**

- I. Welcome and Introductions
- II. Review of the February 14, 2024 Meeting Minutes  
*(please contact PEM staff with corrections)*
- III. Highlights from the First Statewide Highway Safety Conference  
*Ashley Pick, Nebraska Highway Safety Office*
- IV. Focus Area Updates
  - a. Local
    - i. Community Trainings
  - b. Policy
    - i. Legislative Update
    - ii. Legislative Tracking Sheet available at [www.projectextramile.org](http://www.projectextramile.org)
  - c. Enforcement
    - i. Saturation Patrols
    - ii. Law Enforcement Training on Controlled Underage Party Dispersal
  - d. Youth
    - i. Youth Leadership Day – March 18<sup>th</sup>
    - ii. Leadership Network – Next meeting: April 15<sup>th</sup> at 7:00 p.m.
    - iii. Youth Leadership Retreat – June 25-27, 2024
  - e. Awareness
    - i. March Research Summary available at [www.projectextramile.org](http://www.projectextramile.org)
- V. Additional Discussion/Announcements
- VI. Adjournment and Next Meeting Date: **April 10<sup>th</sup>, 9 a.m.**  
*UNO's Community Engagement Center, Room 209*

### **IMPORTANT UPCOMING EVENTS**

Law Enforcement Training – March 20, 2024

Nebraska Liquor Control Commission Hearings – April 2, 2024

Youth Leadership Retreat – June 25-27, 2024

## PROJECT EXTRA MILE

### OMAHA METRO AREA COALITION MEETING MINUTES February 14, 2024

- I. Call to Order: Tom Safranek called the meeting to order at 9 a.m.
- II. Welcome and Introductions: Coalition members and speakers in attendance: Sharona Ernst, Jordan Cedillo, Cody McGee, Kirk Van Pelt, Ashley Pick, Tom Safranek, Aaron Hanson, Jason Sharp, Carey Pomykata, Mike Jones, Jeremy Welsch, Russ Zeeb, Jim Timm, Kyle Percifield, John Sanderson, Teri Speck, Molly Rezich, Rudi Mitchell, Palistene Gray-Moore, Ashley Meyers, Trilety Wade, Chris Foster, and Brandon Raddish. Coalition members in attendance via Zoom: Jayna Schaaf, Whitney Abbott, Meaghan Wade, Jeanne Bietz, Jona Beck, Don Hoes, and Maggie Ballard. Staff members: Chris Wagner, Jenna Abbott, Beatha Kliwer, and Liene Topko.
- III. Approval of Minutes: The minutes from the January 17<sup>th</sup> meeting were included in the coalition meeting packet. No additions or corrections were made.
- IV. Public Safety Priorities for Douglas County: Douglas County Sheriff, Aaron Hanson, shared how the department is working to address the concerns of Douglas County residents. Some of the biggest complaints he's heard from citizens relate to traffic issues, such as impaired and reckless driving. The department has a Community Action Team comprised of behavioral health, community outreach, and school resource officers. He invited attendees to reach out to the department with innovative ideas to address the issues they are seeing so long as they are related to public safety and law enforcement. The coalition expressed concern about alcohol-involved tragedies in the Omaha Metro and the need to identify the source of alcohol in impaired driving crashes.
- V. Focus Area Updates
  - a. Local
    - i. Chris Wagner shared that the Omaha City Council passed an updated "offenses against the public peace" ordinance to help abate nuisance and crime at private properties throughout the city. The ordinance would result in criminal charges against property owners that are contributing to the problem. After three citations within an 18-month period, the certificate of occupancy could be pulled for these properties.
  - b. Policy
    - i. Liene Topko updated the group on bills at the legislature:
      1. LB836 had a hearing in January, PEM testified in support and the Youth Leadership Network students have been in contact with the committee urging them to advance the bill which requires separation of alcoholic and non-alcoholic products.
      2. LB875 had its hearing in February, PEM testified in a neutral capacity. The bill prohibits the sale of alcoholic products at a price less than the retailer purchased it from the wholesaler, however an amendment was introduced that this expires after six months.

3. Wagner explained how LB1276 limits citizen engagement in the licensing process and how that can lead to harms in the community.
    4. Topko also shared that LB1204 has been prioritized by the committee and will likely be used as the vehicle for other bills.
  - ii. The legislative tracking sheet is updated daily and available on the website.
- c. Enforcement
  - i. Topko invited law enforcement in the room to attend the free training on controlled underage party dispersal on March 20<sup>th</sup>. She also invited coalition members who know high school youth to invite them to volunteer at the training.
- d. Youth
  - i. Jenna Abbot shared that the youth have been in contact with senators regarding LB 836 (separation of co-branded alcoholic products) and why this is imperative for reducing underage drinking.
  - ii. The next Youth Leadership Network meeting is on Monday, March 18<sup>th</sup> at 7-8 p.m. at the UNO Community Engagement Center.
- e. Awareness
  - i. The February Research Summaries are available at [www.projectextramile.org/ResearchSummary](http://www.projectextramile.org/ResearchSummary)
  - ii. Topko shared that PEM provides free training for organizations and neighborhood associations as it pertains to underage and excessive drinking as well as the liquor licensing process. She invited attendees to reach out with any training needs.

VI. Additional Discussion/Announcements:

- a. The group discussed the lack of enforcement and training of volunteers for events with special designated liquor licenses (SDL) and potential issues at these events. Law enforcement shared that there is a very limited number of officers present in contrast with attendees at these events, and they are mostly a deterrent instead of being able to proactively enforce the law – think security guard vs. police officer. Concern about underage drinking and fencing was raised and Wagner shared that the Nebraska Liquor Control Commission (LCC) is continuing to address the chapter of their rules that currently require stricter fencing at these events. PEM will keep the group informed on when a public hearing is set.
- b. Ashley Pick with the Nebraska Highway Safety Office invited attendees to attend the first Highway Safety Office Conference in Kearney, NE on February 27-28, 2024. There is no registration fee.

VII. Adjournment and Next Meeting Date: The meeting was adjourned at 10:00 a.m.

# Training Opportunity

## IS YOUR COMMUNITY INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE ABOUT...

### *Excessive Alcohol Consumption*

What is excessive consumption? What are the associated harms? What does it look like in Nebraska? What strategies are proven to be effective in preventing excessive alcohol consumption and its harms?

### *Liquor Licensing Process*

How can communities be more engaged and informed? How can alcohol outlets negatively impact neighborhoods? What can communities do to prevent new and existing problem outlets?

### *Advocacy vs. Lobbying*

Lobbying is always advocacy, but advocacy isn't always lobbying. Being an effective advocate requires us to know the difference between the two. Understanding these basics will help empower organizations and communities to advocate on the issues that most impact them, enhancing both public health and safety.

## TRAININGS ARE TAILORED TO YOUR NEEDS

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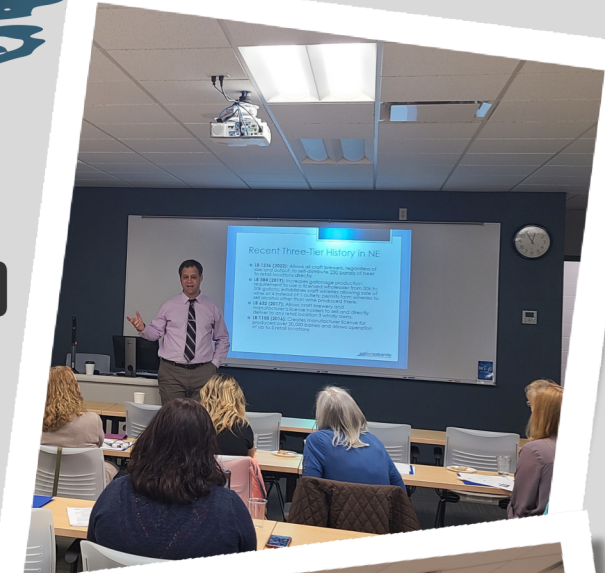
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PREVENTING ALCOHOL-RELATED HARM



# Project Extra Mile's **YOUTH** LEADERSHIP RETREAT

Project Extra Mile is a network of community coalitions across the state of Nebraska working to prevent excessive alcohol consumption, including underage drinking and its harms.

This is only possible through improved laws, increased enforcement, media advocacy, increased awareness and most importantly, powerful young voices leading the way!

## LEARN TO USE YOUR VOICE TO BRING ABOUT CHANGE!

### Where:

Lutheran Church of the Master West  
1200 N 181st Ct., Omaha, NE

### Who:

Students in grades 8-12 who are interested in becoming an effective leader to make change in their community are encouraged to attend.

### When:

June 25-27, 2024

### Cost:

Cost is \$75 per student and includes overnight lodging, food, t-shirt, activities, and of course the leadership retreat!



**REGISTRATION  
OPENS 4/1/24**



402-963-9047



[www.projectextramile.org](http://www.projectextramile.org)

CELEBRATING  
**25** YEARS  
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PREVENTING ALCOHOL-RELATED HARM

This project is supported by the Nebraska Department of Transportation - Highway Safety Office (CFDA 20.600) and the Region 6 Behavioral Healthcare Block Grant, CFDA 93.959/Federal Award Number B08TI084658, through the Department of Health & Human Services, SAMHSA, and NE DHHS.

## Nebraska bill tightening rules on bar, restaurant game machines advances

Written by Zane Culjat, Kevin Westhues and Gina Dvorak

LINCOLN, Neb. (WOWT) - An amendment on a bill that would tighten regulations on games of skill found in bars and restaurants advanced Monday morning in the Nebraska Legislature.

LB685, introduced by State Sen. John Lowe of Kearney, advanced to a second round vote, 31-0. It addresses so-called “mechanical amusement devices.” The Nebraska Supreme Court legalized them in a 2011 ruling — so long as they are games of skill, not games of chance.

Supporters of the bill say the closer watch on these machines would keep illegal games from popping up by way of fees and taxes.

The bill proposes enacting a 5% tax on the machines’ net profits, along with a \$100 fee per machine paid by the distributor. That would increase to \$5,000 if the distributor has 50 or more machines.

The tax money would be split six ways:

- 40% to the property tax credit cash fund, used to lower property taxes
- 20% to the Department of Revenue’s Charitable Gaming Commission to build a central server and pay for the act’s enforcement
- 10% to the Nebraska Tourism Commission
- 2.5% each to the Compulsive Gamblers Assistance Program and the state’s general fund
- 25% to be split evenly between the city or county where the machine is located
- During Monday’s debate, some senators expressed concern about the lack of difference between games of skill versus games of chance.

“They’re basically a modified slot machine, and this is gambling,” said State Sen. Mike Jacobson of North Platte. “There’s not a lot of skills involved here. It’s more luck. Right now, it’s been the Wild West, and that’s what we’ve gotten because the western part of the state has been shut out of having a casino and a race track. We’re getting these games of skill instead. They are becoming drug magnets, where you’re finding that law enforcement is getting called to these facilities at 3:00 in the morning because they’re running 24/7, 365.”

State Sen. Jana Hughes of Seward mentioned seeing a sign on a Lincoln business saying “Try your luck at our skills game” — seemingly contradicting what these games claim to be.

LB685 would also addresses co-branded alcoholic beverages, meaning liquor that contains the same or similar brand names, logos, or packaging as non-alcoholic beverages. Tied to LB836, which Lowe also introduced, the bill would ensure alcohol is not sold adjacent to non-alcoholic products. Stores smaller than 2,500 square feet could sell both types adjacent to one another, but must mark the alcohol as such — and that it is only sold to those ages 21 and older.

## **NSP Troopers arrest 18 impaired drivers in Super Bowl Campaign**

Written by 1011 NOW Staff

LINCOLN, Neb. (KOLN) - Nebraska State Patrol troopers removed 18 impaired drivers from the road this weekend as part of a special enforcement effort around the Super Bowl.

The campaign included numerous law enforcement agencies across the state and entire country.

In total, troopers arrested 18 motorists for driving under the influence. Troopers also issued 144 speeding citations, two minors in possession of alcohol citations, 13 driving under suspension citations, two no seat belt citations, and two improper child restraints citations. Troopers also performed 63 motorists assists over the weekend.

NSP's effort was made possible thanks in part to grant funding from the Nebraska Department of Transportation – Highway Safety Office.

## Omaha City Council approves nuisance ordinance aimed at after-hours parties

Written by Sean MacKinnon

OMAHA, Neb. — The Omaha City Council passed a nuisance ordinance in a 6-1 vote on Tuesday to help prevent people from "disturbing the peace."

Both businesses and individuals could face \$500 fines.

Some council members are ready to shut down after hours partying, others are concerned it'll be difficult to enforce.

Councilman Don Rowe says they're trying to prevent repeat offenders.

"It could be a noise issues, it could be prostitution on the corner, it could be public indecency and lewd behavior," Rowe said.

He also hopes his ordinance stops underage drinking and teen drivers spinning out at Millard West.

"You know the tire marks in the parking lot," Rowe said.

And there are after-hours concerns at 'Club 180' near 180th and Q.

"They advertise that they're open until four or five o'clock in the morning," Rowe said.

The ordinance creates \$500 fines for both individuals and businesses. So what's the responsibility for business owners?

Rowe says they'll need to call police to break up parking lot parties.

"That call not only triggers a response from the police, but it also takes them off the hook as being the responsible party for that party," he said.

Councilwoman Juanita Johnson is against the ordinance. She says police have other priorities.

"Noise is not at the top of the list if perhaps someone is getting their throat slit or there's gunshots going on," Johnson said.

She's afraid Los Diablos Motorcycle Club is going to be fined because young people party in the vacant lots next door.

She says the club's been cited for it in the past.

"Obviously this motorcycle club to the right has no control over anyone parking up and down a street," Johnson said.

Rowe wants the ordinance to be used for repeat offenders but acknowledges it could be used the first time as well.



"Police are going to use their best judgement so I don't think we're going to see some kind of over-policing on it," he said.

KETV NewsWatch 7 reached out to the Omaha Police Department on how they're going to enforce this nuisance ordinance.

They say they'll be getting guidance from the city attorney on what they can and cannot do. But this ordinance is in effect immediately.

## Deputies say suspect in deadly crash has past DUI convictions

Written by Sean MacKinnon

BENNINGTON, Neb. — One person is dead and three others are hurt after an alleged drunk driver crashed into their SUV near Bennington.

Douglas County deputies booked 35-year-old Joshua Kuhl on motor vehicle homicide and other DUI felony charges. Investigators say Kuhl has two prior DUI convictions.

Around 1 a.m. Sunday at 168th and Highway 36, deputies say Kuhl was driving drunk in his truck.

They say he blew past a stop sign and onto the highway, hitting a Subaru and the four people inside it.

"The lives change in an instant. This is a family now that some people are going through surgery, their loved one is deceased," Lt. John Kramer said.

At the scene Sunday afternoon, knocked-over street signs, the victim's car parts, and tire tracks in the ditch are all that remain.

Kramer says Kuhl was over the legal driving limit. Deputies booked him on DUI felony charges.

"His prior DUI convictions allow us to charge him with a more aggravated charge, an enhanced charge. That carries with it higher penalties," Kramer said.

One of those dates back to 2020. Records show Kuhl had his license revoked for one year due to a DUI conviction in Douglas County.

"It's a life-changing event and people just need to stop driving drunk and killing other people," Kramer said.

## **TTB Commences Long Process to Revise its Labeling Rules**

Written by Marc Sorini

The Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB) recently initiated a long-anticipated project to revise the labeling regulations that apply to all the products under its jurisdiction, including most beers (called “malt beverages” under TTB nomenclature). The TTB is considering mandatory disclosure rules for alcohol content, major allergens, nutritional information, and ingredients.

The process will kick off with two days of live “listening sessions” on February 28 and 29, 2024, followed by the acceptance of written comments through March 29, 2024 (a deadline that TTB might extend). Upon gathering feedback, TTB will likely publish proposed regulations, which would be subject to additional commentary from the public. We also expect that TTB will provide a reasonable (two- or three-year) phase-in period. Thus, while this process is very important, brewers should not expect to face new legally binding labeling mandates for four or more years.

The Brewers Association (BA) supports transparency in labeling while also seeking to ensure that new obligations do not stifle innovation or unfairly burden small businesses. Moreover, given the near-universality of smartphones, we support options to allow the disclosure of some consumer information off-label, accessible via an on-label QR code. The European Union recently took this approach with its new wine labeling regulations, providing TTB with an excellent example to follow.

We believe alcohol content and allergen information is especially important to consumers and that labels should show both. In the case of alcohol content, all distilled spirits and most wines already must display this information, and consumers recognize and understand the concept of alcohol by volume. For individuals with sensitivity to the “big nine” allergens (as recognized by laws enforced by the Food & Drug Administration), avoiding those ingredients is a health imperative. On-label disclosure will best protect our valued consumers from inadvertent allergic reactions.

In the case of nutritional information and ingredients, providing an off-label disclosure option will adequately satisfy the needs of those consumers interested in such information. With respect to nutritional information, the TTB’s existing policies establishing a “statement of average analysis” for light beer and similar products provide a solid foundation to work with. We accordingly support requiring disclosure —either on- or off-label—of a beer’s calories, carbohydrate, fat, and protein content. For ingredients, the fact that fermentation has substantially transformed most materials in a finished beer requires a carefully thought-out approach. Rules must avoid misleading consumers into believing, for example, that the barley used to make a beer ends up, after fermentation, being nutritionally similar to the barley used to make, for example, breakfast cereal. Materials consumed during production or added as processing aids should be excluded if not found in the finished beer.

To protect innovation and small businesses, the BA will advocate for an approach that avoids placing a substantial burden on small producers and small-batch products. Keep in mind that any final TTB rule will almost certainly arise from the agency’s Federal Alcohol Administration Act authority. As brewers already know, this authority (which, among other things, determines when a brewer must obtain a Certificate of Label Approval or “COLA” for a label) requires that the beer cross state lines in order to be considered within “interstate commerce.” We accordingly do not expect any new TTB labeling rule to apply to the thousands of taproom-only, brewpub-only, or in-state distribution-only beers produced and sold by our members.

In addition, the BA will seek to ensure that small businesses and brewing operations can readily meet any new rule's measuring tolerances and testing requirements. If TTB eventually proposes rules with tolerances and requirements that would be difficult to meet by small businesses, we will advocate for standards for small batch products that provide greater tolerances and/or less expensive methods to meet those requirements. In the case of testing methods, for example, the BA favors methodologies that small brewers can perform without the need for expensive equipment or outside testing services (e.g., formulas). In the case of tolerances, we favor approaches that allow for the sort of batch-per-batch variations common in the beers of small brewers and in small-batch products, such as seasonals that may vary from year to year.

Finally, the BA will advocate for a reasonable implementation schedule to avoid placing financial burdens on brewers. Once regulations are formulated and finalized, small brewers should be given at least three years to bring their labels and websites into compliance with those new regulations. In addition, even if the TTB decides to move forward on different subjects (e.g., alcohol labeling versus ingredient labeling) on different timelines, it should establish a single effective date for making all the labeling changes mandated by new rules. Brewers do not want to face more than one mandated re-design of labels as a result of this process.

The BA will continue to engage in this rulemaking process to protect the interests of America's small and independent brewers. We will participate in the listening sessions and have encouraged select members and guild leaders to participate as well. Due to the limited time allotted for the sessions, we did not encourage all of our members to make themselves heard, as the TTB would likely respond by excluding additional small brewer voices as redundant. We also will submit written comments as the comment deadline nears.

After the current listening sessions and the close of the written comment period, we expect that the TTB will take at least a year—and quite possibly much longer—to review comments and formulate proposed regulations on these complex subjects. Thereafter, the TTB may publish proposed regulations on all or part of the mandatory labeling subjects contemplated, giving the public (which includes the brewing industry) an additional opportunity to submit comments on the proposed rule. After the TTB reviews and considers those additional comments—also a process that may take a year or more—it can publish a final rule. That final rule will have the force of law, although, as noted, the BA will ask for a lengthy (at least three-year) transition period before brewers must change their labeling and marketing to comply with the new regulations.

We will continue to provide members with information about this important process as it unfolds.

## **Pink ribbon marketing on alcohol reveals need for ‘pinkwashing’ awareness**

Written by Gillings School of Global Public Health

Products with pink ribbons on their labels are a common sight in stores, especially during Breast Cancer Awareness Month every October.

Brands and companies frequently incorporate pink into their marketing, leveraging the strong awareness the pink ribbon carries in American culture to create an impression of social responsibility and increase sales. Because there are no restrictions or trademarks on the pink ribbon, companies are free to use it for any purpose, regardless of whether they contribute profits from the imagery to support breast cancer research or treatment.

This is so commonplace that Breast Cancer Action, a patient-centered advocacy group, coined the term “pinkwashing” to describe pink ribbon marketing done by companies whose products have a direct link to breast cancer, such as alcohol.

Such a practice may seem counterintuitive, but it’s a common problem with big implications that public health researchers like Marissa Hall, PhD, assistant professor of health behavior at the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health, and colleagues are trying to tackle.

“Somewhere between 5-16% of breast cancers in the United States are attributable to alcohol. So, it’s surprising that alcohol is sometimes marketed in conjunction with breast cancer charities,” said Hall, who is also a member of the UNC Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center and a faculty fellow at the Carolina Population Center. “Understanding how consumers are reacting to this kind of marketing felt like an important research gap for us to fill, especially given rising rates of alcohol use among women in the U.S.”

Hall and researchers at UNC-Chapel Hill – including doctoral student Phoebe Ruggles, MS, and Assistant Professor Melissa Cox, PhD, at the Gillings School – worked with colleagues at Stanford University School of Medicine and Boston School of Public Health on a recent study that found that viewing pinkwashed alcohol ads made no difference in a person’s intent to purchase beer, wine or liquor or view them as harmful to health. But for certain beer products, pinkwashed ads led viewers to believe products had a greater health benefit and increased their perception of the brand as favorable and socially responsible.

The study, published in *Addictive Behaviors*, invited 602 adults in the U.S. to take part in a survey where they were shown pinkwashed Instagram ads from one of three common beer, wine and liquor brands. They were also shown one of three ads from the same companies that were not pinkwashed as a control. The survey measured participants’ perceptions of the products and brands shown in the ads, including how healthy they thought the products were, how socially responsible the brand was, and how much they liked the brand overall. The survey also asked participants how likely they would be to purchase the products.

The questions also assessed participants’ perceptions of how much drinking alcohol affects the risk of certain health conditions, including breast cancer. When participants were informed about the strong link between alcohol and breast cancer, they were also asked how misleading they thought the ads were.



On average, the perceptions of health risk and intentions to purchase were not different between the control ads versus the pinkwashed ads. However, after being informed about the link between alcohol and breast cancer, participants were more likely to view the pinkwashed ad as misleading and were more likely to support a policy that required breast cancer warnings on alcohol products.

The researchers wondered if participants would be skeptical of the practice of pinkwashing, but the results did not suggest any skepticism of pinkwashed ads. In fact, pinkwashed beer ads made participants view the beer as healthier, view the brand as more socially responsible, and like the brand more overall.

The researchers said there could be multiple reasons why the pinkwashed ads had no impact on people's perception of breast cancer risk from alcohol, but the finding highlights a need to further explore reasons for the lack of awareness, such as advertising that misrepresents alcohol's harms or a lack of public health messaging. When participants were informed about the risk, those in the pinkwashed arm were more in favor of stronger alcohol regulations, suggesting that exposing deceptive marketing practices like pinkwashing (often called "countermarketing") could increase support for stronger alcohol policies.

"Overall, our findings suggest that exposing the industry practice of pinkwashing could help consumers recognize and disregard this type of advertising," said the study's senior author, Anna Grummon, PhD, a Gillings School graduate and Stanford faculty member. "Policies like health warning labels could also ensure consumers are not misled about the link between alcohol and breast cancer risk."

As a next step in this line of research, Hall and Grummon are co-leading a five-year project from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism to design and evaluate the impact of evidence-based health warnings on alcohol consumption.well."

## **U.S. Deaths Linked to Alcohol Keep Rising, Especially Among Women**

Written by Ernie Mundell

THURSDAY, Feb. 29, 2024 (HealthDay News) -- Deaths where alcohol played a key role climbed sharply in recent years, hitting women even harder than men, new government data shows.

Between 2016 and 2021 (the latest numbers available), "the average number of U.S. deaths from excessive alcohol use increased by more than 40,000 [29%], to 178,000 per year," reported a team from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Put another way, during 2020 and 2021, an average of 488 Americans died each day from excessive drinking, the report's authors concluded.

The rate of increase appears to be accelerating: Between 2016 and 2019, deaths where alcohol was a factor rose by 5%, but between 2018 and 2021 they climbed by 23%.

Men continue to lose their lives to alcohol in greater numbers than women, the report found. However, the rate at which women are dying from excessive drinking is rising faster than that of men, the researchers found.

Over the study period, deaths from excessive alcohol use among women rose by about 35%, compared to about a 27% rise among men.

The new data looked at deaths directly linked to drinking -- things like alcoholic liver disease or excessive intoxication -- as well as more indirect causes, such as heavy drinking's role in heart disease and stroke.

Over the study period, death rates rose for most forms of alcohol-related deaths, but "death rates among females [involving alcohol] were highest from heart disease and stroke," noted a team led by CDC alcohol researcher Marissa Esser.

Why the steady, steep rise in deaths? According to the researchers, numerous factors may be to blame, including a widening of access to alcohol (for example, home delivery) that began during pandemic lockdowns.

Binge drinking also seems to be on the rise. For example, "the prevalence of binge drinking among adults aged 35-50 was higher in 2022 than in any other year during the past decade," the CDC team noted.

That rise doesn't bode well for the future, Esser's group warned.

What can be done to turn these trends around? The researchers believe boosting taxes on alcohol and cutting back on the number of outlets licensed to sell beer, wine and liquor could only help.

The study was published Feb. 29 in the CDC journal Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report.

## **Nebraska bill seeks increase on penalty when unborn children die in DUI crashes**

Written by Bella Caracta

OMAHA, Neb. (WOWT) - A mother who lost her daughter and unborn grandson to an accident with a drunk driver in 2022 delivered emotional testimony Tuesday afternoon in front of Nebraska state senators.

In March of 2022, Zach Paulison, drunk and going more than 102 miles per hour, killed Sara Zimmerman, her unborn baby, Brooks, and her best friend, Amanda Schook.

Thursday, Sara's mom Darla Bengtson relived the tragic loss.

"He would have been turning two in about 45 days," said Bengtson.

She shared her pain with strangers, hoping to convince lawmakers to make the penalty for killing an unborn child, like her grandson Brooks, carry the same weight as her daughter Sara's.

LB974 would increase the penalty for killing an unborn child from a max of three years to 20 years in cases of motor vehicle homicide where the driver is under the influence.

"It is unfair to the victim and the victim's family," said Senator Rick Holdcroft, whose bill highlights inconsistencies that even attorneys like Deputy Douglas County Attorney Ryan Lindberg cannot explain.

"I think it's just an incongruence in the law the purpose here would be to harmonize those penalties," said Lindberg.

The law right now is an outlier. Other fatal crimes in Nebraska have a penalty that is the same regardless of whether the victim is an unborn child or not. That's not the case with motor vehicle homicide where the driver is determined to be under the influence.

"I would love this bill to be known as Brooks' bill in hope that something positive would come from this tragedy," said Bengtson.

With Thursday being the final day for committee hearings, Sen. Holdcroft asked his fellow senators to consider this promptly so it can go for debate this session.

## The Top Cause of Alcohol-Related Deaths Can Go Undetected for Years

Written by Dana Smith

Alcohol-related liver disease is the leading cause of death from excessive drinking — and while it's curable in the earliest stages, many people don't realize they have it until it's too late to reverse.

Annual deaths caused by the disease are on the rise in the United States, having climbed 39 percent in recent years, according to new data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Death rates are highest in men and adults aged 50 to 64, though they are increasing more quickly among women and younger adults.

"People who are drinking are drinking more heavily than they were before, so I think that is the biggest factor," said Dr. Jessica Mellinger, an assistant professor of gastroenterology and hepatology at the University of Michigan Medical School. And, she added, "we're seeing that for the first time in this country, women are drinking as much as men."

What is alcohol-related liver disease?

The first stage of the illness is fatty liver disease, or steatosis. This happens when fat starts to accumulate in the liver, which is responsible for metabolizing alcohol. In the second stage, excessive alcohol consumption activates the body's immune system, causing inflammation in the liver.

"The two big ways that you can damage your liver are by putting fat into it and then by adding inflammation onto the fat," Dr. Mellinger said.

If that damage continues, scar tissue can build up in the liver, leading to the third stage, cirrhosis. Approximately 20 percent of people with alcohol-related fatty liver disease will progress to cirrhosis.

Some people also develop alcohol-associated hepatitis, which is severe liver inflammation. This occurs most often in people with cirrhosis, but it can happen at any stage if people are drinking very heavily (eight to 10 drinks a day). Both liver cirrhosis and alcohol-associated hepatitis can be fatal.

What causes it?

The risk for alcohol-related liver disease increases when people drink more than the recommended limits: seven drinks a week for women and 14 for men. It goes up substantially for women who regularly consume more than three drinks per day and men who have more than four drinks per day, said Dr. Sasha Deutsch-Link, a fellow in gastroenterology and hepatology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Medicine. (Because women metabolize alcohol differently from men, they have a greater risk of disease if they drink the same amount.)

At that level of alcohol use, an estimated 90 percent of people have fat deposits in their livers. The fat can start to accumulate rapidly — in some cases, after just six months of heavy drinking, said Dr. Rohit Loomba, the chief of gastroenterology and hepatology at UC San Diego Health.

Cirrhosis takes years or decades to develop. As a result, severe liver disease is more common in older adults, though Dr. Deutsch-Link said she had seen 20-year-olds with cirrhosis or alcohol-associated hepatitis.

Metabolic conditions, such as obesity, diabetes or hypertension, can also damage the liver. This puts people “at increased risk of progressing to liver disease more quickly at lower levels of alcohol consumption,” Dr. Deutsch-Link said. Worsening metabolic health among Americans may be another reason for the rise in deaths from alcohol-related liver disease.

What are the signs of liver damage?

There are no symptoms in the early stages of alcohol-related liver disease, which makes it difficult to identify.

“The majority of people who may be on their way to developing cirrhosis don’t even know that,” Dr. Loomba said.

When people are diagnosed in the first two stages, it’s often because blood tests have revealed abnormal liver function. These tests may be given as part of routine metabolic screening, or a doctor may recommend them if they are concerned about a patient’s drinking. If someone’s liver enzyme levels are abnormal, an ultrasound or M.R.I. can determine what stage of liver disease the person is in.

Often, though, liver disease is detected only when alarming symptoms appear in the late stages. A patient might have significant fluid and swelling in the abdomen, start vomiting blood or develop jaundice.

How is alcohol-related liver disease treated?

Because the liver can regenerate itself, the earliest two stages of liver disease can be reversed if the patient cuts out alcohol.

“The most important thing is stopping alcohol use for these patients,” Dr. Deutsch-Link said. To help with this, many liver clinics offer treatment for alcohol use disorder, including therapy, group programs or medication to reduce cravings.

Once someone has cirrhosis, “for the most part, that’s considered irreversible,” said Dr. Robert Wong, a clinical associate professor of gastroenterology and hepatology at Stanford University School of Medicine. “And once you get to cirrhosis, you’re at much higher risk of complications, progression, liver cancer and, of course, death, unfortunately.”

However, Dr. Loomba noted that even with cirrhosis, if people stop drinking, “the risk of dying from cirrhosis in the next year goes down significantly.”

If you’re concerned about your liver health, experts said, the first step is to talk to a doctor and ask about liver function tests. The goal is to catch any issues as early as possible.



## **Omaha Police Plan St. Patrick's Day Enforcement**

Written by Terry Leahy

(Omaha, NE) -- With St. Patrick's Day being on a weekend this year, Omaha Police say they will take part in two alcohol selective overtime enforcement operations.

They will be March 15th, 16th and 17th, based around the Saint Patrick's Holiday.

One operation is funded through "Project Extra Mile" on March 15th.

The other enforcement effort is paid for with a grant from the Nebraska Department of Transportation, and covers all three days of the St. Patrick's Day weekend.