



Advocating for evidence-based policies and practices
to prevent and reduce alcohol-related harms.

OMAHA COALITION MEETING
Wednesday, November 10, 2021
9 a.m.

A G E N D A

- I. Welcome and Introductions
- II. Review of the October 13, 2021 Meeting Minutes
(please contact PEM staff with corrections)
- III. Determining the Presence of Alcohol in Traffic Crashes
Ofc. Mike Bossman, Omaha Police Department
- IV. Focus Area Updates
 - a. Local
 - i. Alcohol Availability Assessment Tool
 - b. Policy
 - i. Prevention letter
 - c. Enforcement
 - i. Nebraska Impaired Driving Summit
 - d. Youth
 - i. Leadership Network – Next meeting: November 11, 6:00 PM
 - ii. Leadership Council – Next meeting: November 22, 7:00 PM
 - e. Awareness
 - i. November Research Summary available at www.projectextramile.org
- V. Additional Discussion/Announcements
- VI. Adjournment and Next Meeting Date: **December 8th, 9 a.m.**

IMPORTANT UPCOMING EVENTS

Nebraska Liquor Control Commission Hearings – December 7 & 8, 2021
25th Anniversary Recognition Dinner – May 10, 2022

The mission of Project Extra Mile is to advocate for evidence-based policies
and practices to prevent and reduce alcohol-related harms.

PROJECT EXTRA MILE
OMAHA METRO AREA
COALITION MEETING MINUTES
October 13, 2021

- I. Call to Order: Chris Wagner called the meeting to order via Zoom at 9 a.m.
- II. Welcome and Introductions: Welcome and introductions took place. Coalition members and speakers in attendance: Palistene Gray-Moore, Carey Pomykata, Lanette Richards, Don Hoes, Angela Richards, Christie Abdul-Greene, Jim Boucher, Julia Dilley, Jim Timm, Jona Beck, Mandy Peth, Hayden Romig, Kurt McBride, Traci Sawyer, Jason Thompson, Margie Magnuson, Wayne Hudson, Sharona Crittenden, Jayna Schaaf, Taylor Moore, and Clint Zost. Staff members in attendance: Chris Wagner, Beatha Kliewer, Erin Ayad, and Liene Topko.
- III. Approval of Minutes: The minutes from the September 8, 2021 meeting were included in the coalition meeting packet. No additions or corrections were made.
- IV. Alcohol Availability Assessment Tool: Dr. Julia Dilley with the Oregon Health Authority has been working on analyzing alcohol policy changes as a result of COVID-19 and in collaboration with APHA's Alcohol Action Network created the Alcohol Observation Tool. The purpose of the tool is for community members to document what happens during certain alcohol sales transactions. This data will provide more information that can be used by coalitions, regulators, law enforcement, and policymakers to ensure that alcohol is not being sold to underage youth and intoxicated persons. During a pilot of the tool in Washington state, about half of the businesses were out of compliance or at risk of being out of compliance.

Chris Wagner shared that there is currently no mechanism in place to conduct compliance checks on alcohol deliveries nor curbside pickup, but the organization continues to push for updating the State Patrol's guidelines to include these. Wagner also encouraged coalition members to participate in the recording of observations as they conduct their normal alcohol purchases. He invited those interested to attend the more in-depth meeting on October 21st to learn more and discuss how the coalition can begin to gather this data.

- V. Focus Area Updates
 - a. Local
 - i. Chief Deputy Hudson with the Douglas County Sheriff's Office (DCSO) briefly updated the group on the youth fatality crash that occurred on September 24th involving five minors. The investigation is ongoing but thus far DCSO has learned that the driver attempted to run a yellow light resulting in the crash. During the investigation an alcohol bottle was discovered in one of the minor's car that was not involved in the crash. The Chief expressed a commitment to investigating the adult source of underage drinking. It is DCSO's desire to avoid a situation similar to what occurred in Gretna.

- ii. Erin Ayad discussed a GIS mapping project PEM will be working on with a UNMC student to map the location of alcohol outlets within the city limits of Omaha and the violations that have occurred at those locations. The goal is to start a research project that can be updated with other public health and safety data sets.
- b. Policy
 - i. Coalition partner Christie Abdul-Greene shared that the Screening, Brief Intervention (SBI)-focused training was held on September 17th and discussed the importance of screening for alcohol use and the importance of advocacy from the health care profession on this topic.
 - ii. Liene Topko shared the Nebraska Liquor Control Commission is drafting their 2022 legislative letter which currently does not incorporate any suggestions that PEM has made in recent comments to the Commission. The priorities discussed for the 2021 letter are not substantively different from those included in past letters.
 - iii. Topko invited coalition members to attend the October 19th Policy Work Group meeting.
 - c. Enforcement
 - i. Chris Wagner updated the group that the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to create the Douglas County DUI Task Force is awaiting final Douglas County Board approval. The hope is to hold a press event to raise awareness about the task force's creation and its purpose.
 - d. Youth
 - i. Ayad invited coalition members to share information about the Youth Leadership Council and Network with youth they may know as well as other organizations.
 - e. Awareness
 - i. The October research summary is available on Project Extra Mile's website under the 'Research' page.
- VI. Additional Discussion/Announcement:
Wagner announced Erin Ayad will be leaving the organization and invited coalition members to share the vacancy with colleagues.
- VII. Adjournment and Next Meeting Date: The meeting was adjourned. The next meeting will take place virtually via Zoom on Wednesday, November 10th at 9 a.m.

Miles to Go: Nebraska's Impaired Driving Outlook on a Collision Course with Policymakers' Indifference

Alcohol-impaired driving continues to be a public safety concern that has worsened since the pandemic began. [NHTSA reports that police-reported alcohol involvement crashes increased by 9% in 2020 compared to 2019](#), despite miles traveled decreasing by 430 billion (-13%).

According to the [National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine](#), nearly one-third of all traffic fatalities over the last four decades were alcohol-impaired and almost 40 percent of those fatalities are victims other than the drinking driver, including 214 children under the age of 15 in 2016 alone. The estimated economic cost (medical, lost earnings and productivity, legal costs, property damage) of alcohol-related crashes was \$121.5 billion in 2010. In addition, rural areas are disproportionately affected by alcohol-impaired driving crashes with nearly 50 percent of all alcohol-impaired driving fatalities occurring in rural areas.

Alcohol-related crashes continue to make news in Nebraska. Over the last six months (since May 1, 2021), alcohol-impaired driving has been the subject of 123 media articles across Nebraska with 31 of those articles covering at least one injury or death suffered as a direct result of alcohol-impaired driving. That's an average of about 2 articles every three days. Some of the headlines included:

- [Burwell teen dies in Taylor crash](#)
- ['You could kill someone': Douglas County deputies report alarming DUI trends](#)
- [Grand Island man sentenced to four years in prison for hit and run crash that seriously injured teen](#)
- [Consequences of drunken driving: 8 surgeries and weeks of rehab for 9-year-old](#)
- [Lincoln man facing eighth DUI, possible paralysis of pedestrian](#)
- [Omaha musician killed in West Dodge crash](#)
- [Bellevue principal on leave amid DUI crash investigation that critically injured motorcyclist](#)
- [Grand Island woman accused of driving under the influence with boy in car.](#)

Yesterday, the Nebraska Highway Safety Office held an Impaired Driving Summit to discuss statewide efforts to keep our roads safe with the view that roadways may become even more dangerous following a potential 2022 ballot initiative on medical marijuana. The summit was highlighted by an overview of the Drug Recognition Expert (DRE) program given by Officer Matt Kelly of the Omaha Police Department. Multiple speakers emphasized the need to support DREs and increase their numbers. Nebraska typically has 90 DREs but law enforcement agencies in attendance noted that the current number is much lower. Kearney Police



Chief Bryan Waugh expressed a desire to incentivize his officers to become DREs as KPD currently only has one.

<i>State</i>	Binge Drinking Rate (%)	DUI arrests (per 100,000 population)
<i>Colorado</i>	17.9	422
<i>Iowa</i>	21.5	321
<i>Kansas</i>	17.0	187
<i>Minnesota</i>	18.4	344
Nebraska	20.4	41
<i>North Dakota</i>	20.8	836
<i>South Dakota</i>	17.9	939
<i>Wisconsin</i>	22.8	406
<i>Wyoming</i>	16.4	562

[DUIs Arrests and Fatalities By State | Alcohol.org](#)

Nevertheless, when our state’s legislators were deciding about permanently extending cocktails-to-go and curbside pickup earlier this year, they indicated that law enforcement had not seen a spike in DUIs involving these services. Yet if we look at Nebraska’s DUI numbers, we are significantly lower in terms of arrests compared to neighboring states with similar binge drinking rates, indicating a need for increased enforcement around alcohol but also stronger policies to prevent people from drinking excessively in the first place.

There is no one single solution to this challenge, but the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine made several recommendations in its Getting to Zero Alcohol-Impaired Driving Fatalities report published in 2018. Those include (Nebraska status in parentheses):

- **Significant increases to alcohol taxes** (Attempted in Nebraska in 2019 but immediately shut down by the alcohol industry)
- **Reduce alcohol availability** (Nebraska drastically did the opposite in 2021 when it permanently extended pandemic measures designed to benefit the alcohol industry)
- **Implement standards for permissible alcohol marketing content and placement** across all media, establish consequences for violations, and fund counter-marketing campaigns (No action)
- **Dedicate enforcement to prevent sales to minors** (operations continue to be primarily grant-funded using federal dollars) **and sales to intoxicated persons** (These have yet to occur)
- **Lower the legal blood alcohol content limit from 0.08 to 0.05** (No action)
- **Conduct sobriety checkpoints** (While legal across the state, few agencies engage in checkpoints)
- **All health systems should conduct evidence-based screenings for alcohol misuse** (Approximately half of the health systems in the Omaha area report implementing system-wide evidence-based screenings).

YOUTH LEADERSHIP NETWORK

STUDENTS IN GRADES 8 - 12 ARE
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THURS, NOV 11, 2021

6:00 PM - 7:00 PM

REGISTRATION IS REQUIRED AT THE
FOLLOWING LINK: [BIT.LY/3EG2UCT](https://bit.ly/3EG2UCT)

LET US KNOW IF YOU'LL ATTEND IN
PERSON OR VIA ZOOM

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QUESTIONS? TEXT 402-577-0094



RESEARCH SUMMARY

Date Compiled: November 2021

Key takeaways from included research:

- Researchers looked at cannabis and alcohol involvement in motor vehicle crash fatalities in the United States and found the percentage of fatalities involving cannabis or cannabis and alcohol had more than doubled from 2000 and 2018.
- While awareness of the alcohol and cancer link may still be low, those who were aware of the link were more likely to be supportive of adding warning labels and drinking guidelines to containers as well as banning outdoor alcohol advertising. Greater awareness was associated with stronger policy support.
- Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic many reports have stated that alcohol consumption increased due to increased sales. This study examined national changes in waiting lists for liver transplantation for alcoholic liver disease and the association with alcohol sales during the pandemic. Researchers concluded that waiting lists registrations and deceased donor liver transplants for alcoholic hepatitis increased significantly. Though this does not show causality, the disproportionate increase may indicate a relationship between increased alcohol sales and increased alcohol misuse.
- As a result of an Australian study examining online liquor licenses, recommendations were submitted to the Liquor & Gaming oversight agency asking for key reforms regarding the gaps in safeguards. These gaps included inconsistent application of the Liquor Act; the inability for regulators to complete compliance auditing; and the absence of consistent mandatory signage.
- Youth are impacted by their home environment and what they viewed as normal. After examining the effect of parental drinking on perceived social norms, researchers found that many parents, particularly fathers, consume in front of their children, often in excess. Health promotion strategies need to be targeted toward adults and parents to reduce the likelihood a child may perceive this behavior as normal in the future.

Alcohol is one of the biggest risks for breast cancer, warns World Health Organization

Written by Pascale Davies

There is no safe level of alcohol consumption and the risk of breast cancer increases with each unit of alcohol per day, says the World Health Organization (WHO).

Alcohol consumption is one of the “major modifiable risk factors” for the disease, the WHO said during Breast Cancer Awareness Month.

The health body says breast cancer is the most frequently diagnosed cancer type in the WHO European Region, with 1,579 women diagnosed with breast cancer every day, and estimates that alcohol causes seven of every 100 new breast cancer cases in the European region.

“Many people, including women, are not aware that breast cancer is the most common cancer caused by alcohol among women globally,” said Dr Marilyns Corbex, Senior Technical Officer on noncommunicable diseases, WHO/Europe.

“People need to know that by reducing alcohol consumption they can reduce their risk of getting cancer. It doesn’t matter what type, quality or price alcohol is.”

Europe has the highest rate

The WHO European Region, which comprises 53 countries, has the highest rate of new breast cancer diagnoses compared to any of its other regions.

The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) said in 2020 that alcohol consumption was responsible for almost 40,000 new breast cancer cases in Europe.

The same data shows that breast cancer has become the most common cancer globally. More than two million new cases were estimated in 2020, with about 100,000 of these attributable to alcohol consumption.

No safe level of consumption

The WHO says that more than 10 per cent of alcohol-attributable cancer cases in the European region arise from drinking just one bottle of beer (500 ml) or two small glasses of wine (100 ml each) every day.

For breast cancer, this is even higher, with 1 in 4 alcohol-attributable breast cancer cases in the region being caused by this amount.

How does alcohol harm the body?

The IARC classifies alcohol as a Group 1 human carcinogen and it is linked to seven types of cancer.

Not only can alcohol increase the risk of breast cancer, it can also increase the risk of cancers of the mouth, throat, oesophagus, liver, voice box and large intestine and rectum.

“Simply put, alcohol is toxic. It harms every organ while it passes through the body,” said Dr Carina Ferreira Borges, Acting Director for Noncommunicable Diseases and Programme Manager for Alcohol and Illicit Drugs at WHO/Europe.

She recommended limiting the amount of alcohol and replacing alcohol with other beverages. She also urged nationwide policies that help to reduce alcohol consumption.

The WHO also recommends that countries make alcohol less affordable (for example increasing taxes), banning or restricting alcohol marketing across the media, placing health warnings on alcoholic beverages and reducing the availability of alcohol (i.e. regulating sale hours).

Ex-Waterloo firefighter charged with sexual assault; Omaha woman says she was drugged

Written by Alia Conley

On her 27th birthday in March of this year, Kelsey Imhof tried to replicate the violent vomiting, deleted memory and long-lasting sickness she experienced after she allegedly was raped a month before.

In her makeshift experiment, Imhof, a thin, petite woman, downed more than a dozen shots of liquor and finished more than a half-dozen beers. The next morning, she felt hungover but never blacked out.

On her February outing with co-workers, she drank a total of just 2½ drinks.

But the morning after, she woke up vomiting in a bathroom she didn't recognize. She was naked, with bruises on her back, sides and legs. (A chiropractor later told her that he had seen survivors of rollover car crashes in better shape than she was in.) Her vagina and anus were sore and extremely painful.

The man whose home in which she found herself belonged to now-former Waterloo volunteer firefighter Brandon Hanusek. Hanusek was in the same Steamfitters and Plumbers Local 464 union as Imhof, but she had met him only the previous night.

Authorities allege that Hanusek drugged her drink with a substance that led her to be incapacitated that night and then sexually assaulted her.

Hanusek, 27, faces up to 50 years in prison if he is convicted of first-degree sexual assault of a mentally or physically incompetent person. Neither he nor his attorney returned messages seeking comment.

The World-Herald doesn't name victims or alleged victims of sexual assault unless the people agree to be named.

"Going through what I've gone through, I know exactly why people don't come forward," Imhof told The World-Herald. "And looking back at it, I don't know if I would have, knowing what I know now. So if me coming forward gives anybody even just a little bit of strength to come forward, I feel like it's my duty to do that."

Imhof said she first crossed paths with Hanusek when he added her as a friend on Facebook and said he had a sticker for her work hard hat that she had been looking for. They made plans to meet at a bar on Feb. 26 after work with three other co-workers, one of whom was Imhof's friend.

They went to Holiday Lounge near 79th Street and West Dodge Road.

Imhof said she told a Waterloo police investigator that at the bar, she drank half of the three mixed drinks she had ordered.

About an hour later, they headed to Harold's Bar near 85th and Blondo Streets — near Imhof's house.

Hanusek, she said, bought a round of drinks for everyone. Shortly thereafter, she said, one of the co-workers realized he had left his credit card at Holiday Lounge. Imhof offered to return to the bar to retrieve it for him, and Hanusek offered to drive her.

“I remember as I was signing (the co-worker’s) name on the receipt (at Holiday Lounge), feeling out of nowhere I was starting to get really drunk or the alcohol was starting to hit,” Imhof said.

She returned to Harold’s and gave the card back to her co-worker. Then, she remembers sliding pucks on a shuffleboard table a few times.

A Harold’s bar worker later told a police investigator that she saw “the blonde girl” fall and asked if she was all right. A man with the group then said he had jokingly tripped her.

Imhof has no memory of that.

“Next thing I knew, I was mid-vomit, completely naked in a random bathroom,” she said.

She thinks the time was between 2 a.m. and 4 a.m. She said she stayed in the bathroom for a couple of hours because she could hardly walk from her calf muscles locking up. She then left the bathroom, saw a man who she assumed was passed out on the couch and went to a bedroom, according to an affidavit.

She found her clothes and shoes and noticed that her long-sleeved shirt, T-shirt and sports bra were arranged in a strange way.

“Imhof stated all three items had been removed at one time from her body, leaving each layer of clothing connected to the next,” the affidavit said. “Imhof stated she would never remove her clothing in such a manner due to the tightness of the sports bra, and removing her clothes in such a manner is not something she does.”

She went back to the bathroom to vomit, then to the bedroom again to try to rest. But every five or 10 minutes, she felt the need to return to the bathroom to throw up. Imhof said this continued until about 2 p.m. that day.

When she finally felt better, she dressed and went to talk to Hanusek. She said that when she asked him what had happened the previous night, he laughed and said he couldn’t remember, either. He told her, however, that he did remember driving her to her home, but said she was locked out of her house and the garage code did not work.

Imhof later told the investigator that it’s impossible for her to be locked out — she kept her front door unlocked — and she doesn’t have a keypad to access the garage.

After Hanusek drove her back to her pickup truck, which was parked at Harold’s Bar, she went to her home and entered through her unlocked front door. (She noted that she locks her door now.)

Imhof said she went inside her bathroom and started to draw a bath, but ultimately never bathed or showered. When her sister called her, she broke down crying.

Her sister told her to go to the hospital. Imhof then drove to Methodist Hospital, which is nearby. After about a half-hour of sitting in her car, she went inside and completed a sexual assault exam and provided urine to be tested for the presence of a date rape drug.

Douglas County Attorney Don Kleine declined to provide specifics about the case because it is pending, but said that Imhof was affected by alcohol and a substance possibly put into her drink.

“The person isn’t capable of consenting because she was incapacitated — she was physically incapable of resisting,” Kleine said.

A Waterloo police investigator spoke to Hanusek, who said he drank six mixed drinks and six shots at the first bar. He said he remembered taking Imhof to grab the credit card but nothing else at the second bar. He told the investigator he parked in Imhof’s driveway and waited for her to open her garage door via a keypad and leaned against a retaining wall.

The investigator said in the affidavit that Imhof did not have a garage door keypad and noted that a retaining wall on the left side of the garage is very low and not high enough for someone to lean against.

Hanusek said he likely thought Imhof was too intoxicated to drive and offered that she “sleep in his bed” because she couldn’t get into her home, the affidavit said.

Hanusek voluntarily allowed his cheeks to be swabbed for DNA.

The results from Imhof’s hospital exam, returned about two months later, showed that Hanusek’s DNA was present on several genital, cervical and anal swabs taken from Imhof.

Hanusek was charged in late May. He was arrested eight days later by the Douglas County Sheriff’s Office, on June 4. He posted \$2,500, or 10% of his \$25,000 bail, and was released from jail later that day. His next hearing is scheduled for November.

Waterloo Volunteer Fire Department Chief Travis Harlow said in an interview that he was aware before May that police were investigating Hanusek, but he didn’t place Hanusek on administrative leave until after he was charged with first-degree sexual assault.

Harlow estimated that Hanusek has been with the department as a firefighter for about six or seven years. Hanusek has not had nor will he have any access to the fire station until the case is resolved, depending on the outcome, Harlow said.

Sexual assault “is obviously not tolerated or condoned or represents the Waterloo Fire Department in any manner whatsoever,” Harlow said. “It’s a bad situation all around, and we hope that the courts do justice.”

Hanusek faced a hearing within the Local 464 union relating to the alleged sexual assault and was found to have violated parts of the union’s constitution and bylaws. The United Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of the Plumbing and Pipe Fitting Industry recently affirmed the local’s finding and punishment of expulsion and \$50,000 fine for Hanusek, according to a letter from the general secretary-treasurer of the national group.

Imhof said she wants Hanusek to be held accountable for his actions.

“The only way for sure that he won’t do it again is if he goes to jail,” Imhof said. “If there’s other people that have had this happen to them, if me coming out can give them the courage to come out as well, I want to do that.”

Excessive drinking during pandemic leads to dramatic spike in liver transplants, study says

Written by Scott Gleeson

The national list for people seeking liver transplants skyrocketed during the coronavirus pandemic, shooting up 50% higher than predicted before COVID-19 affected the country.

A study released Tuesday by University of Michigan researchers – published in JAMA Network Open – revealed a positive correlation between the increase in the number of people on a waiting list for a liver and the increase in retail sales of alcohol during the pandemic timeframe.

People seeking liver transplants experience alcoholic hepatitis – when the liver stops processing alcohol and instead creates toxic chemicals that trigger inflammation and kill off healthy liver cells needed to survive.

In the new study, researchers compared the exact number of new people put on the U.S. organ transplant list from March 2020 to January 2021 with the projected numbers that were based on pre-pandemic data. Researchers next correlated national monthly retail alcohol sales records between January 2016 and 2021.

"While we cannot confirm causality, this disproportionate increase in association with increasing alcohol sales may indicate a relationship with known increases in alcohol misuse during COVID-19," the researchers wrote, "this study provides evidence for an alarming increase in (alcoholic hepatitis) associated with increasing alcohol misuse during COVID-19 and highlights the need for public health interventions around excessive alcohol consumption."

Alcoholic hepatitis is a condition that often develops after years of heavy drinking; however, it can also develop after a short period of excess. Scientists are unclear as to why the condition develops for certain people.

The study falls in line with previous pandemic research, including one study that reported nearly 1 in 5 Americans turning to "heavy drinking" to cope as recently as April. A study by the Rand Corp. last fall found the frequency of alcohol consumption in the U.S. rose 14% compared with before the pandemic. Women, in particular, increased heavy drinking days by 41%, according to the study.

A survey published Monday by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration found different results – with American adults claiming to have consumed about the same amount of alcohol during the pandemic, at least in the fourth quarter of 2020.

Alcohol Companies Benefit From Underage Drinking

Written by Academic Minute

How much do alcohol companies benefit from underage drinking?

David Jernigan, professor in the department of health law, policy and management at Boston University School of Public Health, takes a look at the numbers.

David Jernigan, PhD, is a professor in the Department of Health Law, Policy and Management at the Boston University School of Public Health. He has written more than 140 peer-reviewed journal articles, contributed chapters to seven books on alcohol issues, and has served as an advisor to the World Bank and the World Health Organization.

Alcohol is the number one illegal drug used by American young people, and every year about 3500 people under 21 die because of alcohol use. In 2019, 7 million young people had alcohol and 4.2 million reported binge drinking in the past month.

My research team was curious, we asked more than 1000 young people about their consumption of alcohol by brand. We combined those data with estimates of adult alcohol consumption from national surveys to calculate the percent of alcohol drunk by youth, and how much money alcohol companies make from it.

We estimated that in 2016, underage youth consumption accounted for 8.6% of the drinks consumed and 7.4% of the dollars spent on alcohol. This translates into \$17.5 billion going to alcohol companies. Three accounted for nearly half of the alcohol consumed by youth, and earned billions from it: \$2.2 billion for Anheuser-Busch Inbev, \$1.1 billion for MillerCoors, and \$2 billion for Diageo, the world's largest spirits marketer.

In 2003, the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine recommended the creation of an independent fund to support underage drinking prevention, to which alcohol companies would contribute ½ of one percent of their revenues. For AB Inbev, this would have amounted to \$78 million – a fraction of what the company earned from youth consumption. Yet no such fund was ever created. Our findings suggest that alcohol companies have a big conflict of interest with underage drinking prevention, and that they are profiting from and not paying for the damages their products cause for young people.

U.S. traffic deaths soar 18% in 2021 to highest first half since 2006

Written by David Shepardson

WASHINGTON, Oct 28 (Reuters) - U.S. traffic deaths soared by 18.4% in the first six months of 2021 from the same period a year earlier, for the most deadly first half on American roads since 2006, the Transportation Department said on Thursday.

Traffic deaths surged after coronavirus lockdowns ended in 2020 as more drivers engaged in unsafe behavior like speeding and driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol, regulators said. That made for the largest six-month increase ever recorded in the Fatality Analysis Reporting System's history, which has been in use since 1975.

"This is a crisis," U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg said in a statement. "We cannot and should not accept these fatalities as simply a part of everyday life in America."

Buttigieg said the department will release a National Roadway Safety Strategy in January with a comprehensive set of actions to reduce serious injuries and deaths.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) estimated 20,160 people died in car crashes in the first six months of 2021 in the United States, up 3,140 over the same period in 2020. Travel on U.S. roads was up 13% in the first half compared to a year earlier.

One factor in the big jump in 2020 was that drivers who remained on the roads engaged in riskier behavior, NHTSA said. As U.S. roads became less crowded, some motorists perceived police were less likely to issue tickets because of COVID-19, some experts said.

NHTSA released behavioral research findings from March 2020 through June this year that indicated incidents of speeding and traveling without a seatbelt were higher than before the pandemic.

NHTSA said in the three months ending June 30 alone, traffic deaths rose by 23.1%, the highest quarterly increase ever.

"This nightmare on our roads needs to stop," said Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) President Alex Otte. "Traffic safety enforcement has been cut and we are seeing the horrific consequences. A shortage of officers has resulted in the elimination of DUI task forces in some cities."

Many substances impair drivers

Written by Hub opinion

Any Nebraskan with a driver's license knows that drunken and impaired driving is a serious safety threat in this state, but it's our bet that many Nebraskans underestimate just how dangerous our roads are.

The Nebraska Department of Transportation reported this week that more than 1,000 people are killed or injured every year in Nebraska in impaired driving crashes. That statistic includes alcohol- and drug-related deaths.

Every Nebraskan owes a debt of gratitude to the men and women who patrol our streets and highways to remove drivers who have no business being behind the wheel. To their credit, our state's law officers arrest more than 6,000 drivers every year for driving under the influence of drugs — including alcohol — and there are many more impaired drivers on the road.

As we said, we Nebraskans know that drunk and impaired driving is a serious safety threat, but we might not know that every evening an average of one in five drivers is drunk or impaired. They should not be on the road, endangering everyone else who is sharing the highway.

We're fortunate that 6,000 impaired drivers are arrested each year. They're removed before they harm others or themselves. Being tossed in jail, getting fined and seeing car insurance premiums shoot through the roof is unpleasant, but these drivers are lucky that the law caught up with them and prevented them from doing serious harm.

Not everyone is so lucky. Too many alcohol- and drug-impaired drivers are doing the wrong thing. They're driving after drinking or getting high, leaving them with weakened faculties. They react slowly, get distracted easily, and might even pass out, but because of their impaired judgment, they figure everything will be all right.

Wrong!

Next week nearly 100 Nebraska law enforcement officers, highway safety professionals and legal experts will attend a summit on Wednesday at Lincoln. They'll learn more about the effects that prescription and illegal drugs, marijuana and alcohol have on drivers.

The seminar is sponsored by NDOT's Highway Safety Office, AAA Nebraska and the Nebraska Trucking Association, and its goal is to increase the awareness of the growing issue of impaired driving. While we appreciate the effort all of these public servants are putting into the seminar, Nebraskans can't be satisfied with leaving enforcement and prevention only in the hands of these safety professionals.

There is something every Nebraskan can do to make our roads safer. We already know the negative effects that alcohol and drugs have on drivers. Nebraskans can help prevent needless deaths and injuries simply by putting our foot down. Don't let your friend drive drunk or impaired. Designate a driver, give them a lift, let them sleep on your couch, but don't let them drive. They might harm or kill someone, and you could have done something to prevent it.