

ALCOHOL, TOBACCO, AND OTHER DRUG (ATOD) SECTION



AMERICAN PUBLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION  
*For science. For action. For health.*

July 10, 2020

The Honorable Larry Hogan  
Chair  
National Governors Association  
444 North Capitol Street NW, Suite 267  
Washington, D.C. 20001

Dear Governor Hogan:

As public health and substance misuse prevention experts, we are concerned about efforts to weaken and remove alcohol policies in states across the country. Many of these laws and policies regulating the availability and access of alcohol are based on years of scientific evidence and practice to reduce excessive alcohol consumption (binge, heavy, underage drinking, etc.), alcohol-related injuries, hospitalizations, and mortality. Unfortunately, many of them are being weakened and/or dismantled in response to the economic challenges that have accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic. **We are calling on the National Governors Association to urge all governors to restore these policies at the earliest opportunity and strengthen the policies listed below to save lives.**

Excessive alcohol consumption is the third leading cause of preventable death in the United States [accounting for 88,000 deaths per year](#). To make matters worse, the pandemic arrived on the heels of two decades of steady increases in alcohol consumption across the population (increases across racial/ethnic groups, women, and older residents), [a doubling of alcohol-related mortality, and a significant rise \(62%\) in alcohol-related emergency room visits](#), according to the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. Reports from alcohol sales and government sources suggest that several months of lockdown, social isolation, and COVID-19 related fears have exacerbated alcohol problems.

As states begin to reopen, we urge states and local governments to strengthen the following alcohol policies to save lives and reduce alcohol-related harms:

- **Reduce alcohol availability** – As the concentration of alcohol retail outlets in an area increases--and they do so disproportionately in poor neighborhoods--[alcohol](#)

[consumption and related harms, such as injury, crime, and violence increases significantly](#). The pandemic may provide an opportunity to reduce concentrations by reducing the total number of available licenses as establishments close.

Immediate Action Steps:

- Do not extend home delivery, the hours during which alcohol can be purchased, or allow “to go drinks” to be purchased from on-premise locations.
  - Reduce the number of alcohol retail outlets -- This can be achieved by encouraging non-alcohol focused, small businesses to replace alcohol retailers that were forced to close due to the coronavirus or regulating outlet density.
  - Prevent permanent expansion of outdoor alcohol sales.
- ***Increase the price of alcohol*** – The Community Preventive Services Task Force recommends state excise tax levels of at least: [\\$1 per gallon for beer, \\$2 per gallon for wine, and \\$8 per gallon for spirits](#). Studies have shown that not only does excessive alcohol consumption [cost the U.S. at least \\$249 billion annually](#), but also that [doubling alcohol excise taxes](#) would reduce alcohol-related mortality by an average of 35%, traffic crash deaths by 11%, sexually transmitted disease by 6%, violence by 2%, and crime by 1.4%. With state and local governments facing budget challenges due to the pandemic, long overdue increases in alcohol taxes will save lives and help governments offset some of these costs.

Immediate Action Steps:

- Increase state alcohol excise taxes to the levels recommended by the Community Preventive Services Task Force (see above).
  - Establish/increase alcohol sales taxes.
  - Create a minimum unit price for alcohol.
- ***Enforce underage drinking laws*** – The Minimum Legal Drinking Age of 21 is estimated to save 1,000 lives per year. One of the most effective ways to prevent underage access to alcohol is through regular (quarterly) alcohol compliance checks to ensure illegal sales to minors do not occur. While the social provision of alcohol is the predominant way in which young people access alcohol, retail access is still a source for youth access and requires routine monitoring that evidence suggests is key to preventing these sales. Research suggests that when enforcement efforts are limited, non-compliance rates increase. Protocols must be altered to continue these effective operations to maintain social distancing requirements; however, they must continue and we recommend the National Liquor Law Enforcement Association and regulatory bodies be encouraged to create these protocols based on best practice.

Immediate Action Steps:

- Work with the National Liquor Law Enforcement Association to adjust regulations and guidelines for conducting compliance checks on alcohol retailers given the new reality of COVID-19.

- Ensure that state and local enforcement are able to conduct compliance check operations on transactions involving alcohol delivery.
- Resist efforts to allow amnesty from liquor law enforcement and prosecution.
- ***Strengthen regulations related to alcohol advertising*** –The industry has been allowed to regulate itself and it is not working. The industry’s own advertising standards were [violated billions of times between 2005-2012](#), which is troubling given that for each additional advertisement a young person saw (above the monthly youth average of 23), [they drank 1% more](#). Advertising takes shape in many forms and states, and some localities can adopt policies that restrict window signage of advertisements and ban alcohol billboards in residential areas to reduce youth exposure to alcohol advertising.

These policies will save lives, increase workplace productivity and reduce taxpayer costs. Furthermore, they are recommended by organizations such as the American Medical Association; the American Society of Clinical Oncology; the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; the Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America; the Community Preventive Services Task Force; the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine; the Non-Communicable Diseases Alliance; and the World Health Organization.

We have formed a small advisory group of top scientists and local public health professionals to help assess options and make recommendations for your state. If you would like assistance, please contact Dr. Sean Haley at [leadership@apha-atod.org](mailto:leadership@apha-atod.org). Additionally, we have compiled resources regarding examples of industry-promoted deregulation and the risks it presents for public health and safety. [They are available here.](#)

Respectfully,



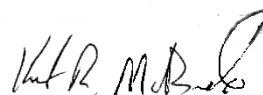
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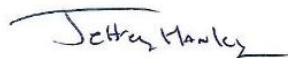
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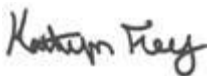
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CC: Association of State and Territorial Health Officials  
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National Conference of State Legislatures  
National League of Cities  
National Conference of State Liquor Administrators