

Midlands Voices: Reevaluating alcohol's role in society

Written by Chris Wagner

There has been social media and news coverage of the partnership between the National Pediatric Cancer Foundation and a local brewery to raise money to fight pediatric cancer. The cause is noble and one we should all support, but this partnership risks spreading cancer to cure cancer.

Based on survey data, more than 60 percent of Nebraskans are not aware that alcohol causes at least seven types of cancer. Alcoholic beverages are classified as a Class 1 carcinogen, meaning that they are known to cause cancer in humans, and the more one drinks the higher the risk for developing cancer becomes. Other Class 1 carcinogens include asbestos, formaldehyde, and tobacco. It would be nearly unthinkable to imagine a lung cancer foundation partnering with a tobacco company to raise money for lung cancer, yet that is what is happening when it comes to alcohol.

Sadly, the National Pediatric Cancer Foundation is not alone — many organizations use alcohol as a major fundraising tool, including those devoted to treating and curing cancer. There is a “Crawl for Cancer” organization based in Kansas that organizes bar crawls in major cities across the United States, including in Omaha, with the goal of raising money for cancer research. Many organizations use alcohol to raise money specifically for breast cancer, which is ironic given that alcohol is one of the biggest risk factors for breast cancer. Nebraska churches, non-profit organizations, youth sports foundations, etc. all sell alcohol to make money for their causes even though alcohol misuse negatively impacts their congregations, missions, and youth.

The Nebraska State Fair expanded its use of alcohol this year by allowing fairgoers to walk the entire fairgrounds while drinking alcohol. The decision was rushed through city council and the nature of the changes even took the Nebraska Liquor Control Commission by surprise when four community service organizations appeared at its monthly meeting to oppose the proposal.

This month, the Omaha Zoo added alcohol to its Halloween Nights that are primarily focused on elementary-aged children and their families. The University of Nebraska recently decided to approve a two-year pilot to add alcohol sales to Nebraska basketball games and the City of Lincoln waived its own rules to approve the proposal without much debate about concerns that it will be extremely easy for of-age fans to pass alcohol to underage and intoxicated fans in the seating areas. Alcohol is quick and easy money in the short term, but there are serious consequences to having alcohol this prevalent in our communities and drinkers aren't the only ones paying the costs.

According to both the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, more than 700 Nebraskans die every year from alcohol-related causes, including more than 70 due to cancers connected to alcohol consumption. Two of the cancers for which alcohol consumption is a risk factor (colorectal and female breast cancer) have been the deadliest to Nebraskans for almost a decade. In addition, Nebraskan taxpayers are on the hook for nearly \$500 million of the \$1.2 billion of economic costs that our state pays each year due to excessive consumption.

Efforts to raise awareness about the alcohol-cancer connection are currently underway. A coalition of consumer groups announced earlier this month that they have sued the Department of Treasury because it failed to act on a 19-year-old petition urging it to require alcohol labeling featuring alcohol content, calorie, ingredient, and allergen information. Furthermore, a coalition of consumer and public health groups, including but not limited to the American Institute for Cancer Research and the American Society of Clinical Oncology, submitted a petition in 2020 to the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau to require alcoholic beverage containers to feature a cancer warning.

Such actions are important first steps towards increasing awareness among the public, allowing them to make better-informed decisions when it comes to what they consume. Nevertheless, achieving increased awareness won't be the silver bullet to our state's problems. We already have a list of evidence-based policies that have proven effective in other states that have been communicated to our policymakers, including increasing alcohol taxes, adding adult dram shop liability to our existing law for underage youth, regulating outlet density, and maintaining limits on days and hours of sale.

It's going to take people whose lives have been forever changed by alcohol to motivate policymakers at all levels to government to take this problem more seriously. Our elected officials continue to bend over backwards to pass laws that benefit the alcohol industry in the name of economic development while all Nebraskans continue to pay the economic and social costs to subsidize the industry's gains.