

Officials fear pandemic reversed a decline in teen alcohol use

Written by Tim Johnson

Alcohol has been the go-to substance for teenagers across the country for decades. Nebraska is no different.

But what effect did the COVID-19 pandemic have on underage drinking? Chris Wagner, the executive director of Project Extra Mile, said the next round of surveys on the behaviors of Nebraska high school students — conducted every two years — will answer that question.

Wagner said the last survey, conducted before the pandemic, showed a slight decrease in alcohol use among teens.

But he added, “We’re fearful that with the pandemic ... we could see (those numbers) go in the opposite direction, which is obviously concerning.

“It’s a wait and see (for the survey results) but from everything we’ve heard, it’s going to be worse.”

Wagner and Liene Topko, the policy and research coordinator for Project Extra Mile, conducted a community training workshop and discussion at Mid-Plains Community College on Thursday.

The sessions focused on excessive alcohol consumption and underage drinking as well as liquor licensing in the state.

The Omaha Project Extra Mile states on its website that it is an agency that advocates evidence-based policies to prevent underage drinking, limit youth access to alcohol and prevent alcohol-related harms for all ages.

The efforts come as Nebraska has a reputation as a hard-drinking state,

Topko told the workshop attendees that a recent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ranked the state fourth in the country with an adult binge-drinking rate of 20.4%.

Lincoln, Omaha and Norfolk ranked among the 25-worst binge-drinking cities out of 136 that were indexed nationwide.

North Platte and Sioux City also were among the 45 worst cities.

Topko also shared information from a 2020 survey in which 53% of 20-year-olds who responded admitted to binge-drinking within the past month.

The most recent high school student survey found that 58% of teens had their first drink before turning 15 years old. In addition, 21% of respondents who admitted to drinking alcohol said they had done so in the last 30 days.

Wagner said the latter figure has actually come down from the previous survey — maybe by just a few percentage points — but it still was an improvement.

He said while teens still want to be accepted by their peers, some are becoming more firm on their stance about not drinking and not giving into pressure.

“I think we are seeing youth are more health conscious. This generation appears to be,” Wagner said. “That may be playing into it. (The percentage) is more than we would like to see and still quite high, but (the numbers) were getting better. We just want to keep that moving in the right direction.”

He said the problem is the alcohol industry tries to tap into that mindset as well.

“You look and see the opposite side. Companies making alcohol water essentially,” Wagner said. “The seltzers with the fruit flavoring and the message, ‘This is really healthy.’”