

Local view: Preventable tragedies demand action

Written by Chris Wagner

On July 9, at around 6:30 p.m., tragedy struck two young boys, their family, and our entire community. According to the Omaha Police Department, an impaired driver, who later tested above the legal limit, was traveling at nearly 100 mph when he slammed into a vehicle that was attempting to make a turn. The force of the crash was so severe that it split the impacted vehicle in half. In the back seat of that vehicle were two brothers, ages 10 and 5, with their entire lives ahead of them. Despite the efforts of emergency responders, both boys later died from their injuries.

We cannot allow ourselves to become numb to tragedies like this. There is much more we can and must do to prevent excessive alcohol consumption and impaired driving that leads to tragedies like this.

There is no single solution to a problem that has plagued our state and nation causing 178,000 deaths and nearly \$250 billion in economic costs each year, but there are evidence-based solutions that have worked to significantly reduce excessive alcohol consumption and its harms in other states and around the world. Many of them are policies that lawmakers can enact to change the environment in which individual decisions are made around alcohol consumption.

Some states are much better at changing that environment than others. They restrict how alcohol is sold, how it is advertised, and tax it more heavily to discourage binge and heavy drinking, leading to lower excessive consumption rates. Nebraska is not one of those states — over the past two decades, we consistently rank in the Top 10 worst binge drinking states in the nation. The latest data available shows that we are the third worst. This is due to outdated tax rates that haven't been increased to keep pace with inflation, tax cuts on emerging types of alcohol, hyper availability of alcohol in neighborhoods, and a lack of swift and meaningful penalties for illegal alcohol sales. Consequently, over 1,000 Nebraskans die each year due to excessive alcohol consumption, and our state has over \$1 billion in economic costs annually.

With regard to alcohol-impaired driving, studies have shown that a person can drive up to 2,000 times while under the influence of alcohol before being arrested. One study found that Nebraskans reported driving while intoxicated at a rate of 955 episodes (from Point A to Point B) per 1,000 population — that's nearly double the national average and the second worst rate at the time of the study.

Between 2015 and 2024, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reported an average of 69 alcohol-involved fatality crashes in Nebraska involving a driver with a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of 0.08 or higher, this is approximately 28% of all fatal crashes in that timespan. An additional 14 fatalities per year involved a driver with a BAC between 0.01-0.08%. The Nebraska Highway Safety Office also reports an average of 572 serious and minor injury crashes involving an impaired driver between 2021 and 2025. These are injuries that seriously alter people's lives forever and could have been prevented with evidence-based policies.

Higher taxes reduce excessive drinking, binge drinking, youth alcohol use, impaired driving, and alcohol-related deaths. During the last Legislature, there was a bill that would have been monumental in reducing alcohol-related harms. It would have increased the state sales tax on alcoholic beverages by 10% and used a portion of the projected \$133 million in revenue to treat and prevent excessive alcohol use. That measure did not make it out of committee despite the state needing to address a \$640 million deficit.

We've seen higher taxes work in other states. Maryland implemented a 3% alcohol sales tax in 2011 and found that adult binge drinking declined by 17% over the following five years. High school alcohol use fell by 26%, youth binge drinking dropped by 28%, and alcohol-positive drivers between the ages of 21-34 declined by 12%. A 2009 tax increase in Illinois reduced fatal alcohol-related motor vehicle crashes by 26%.

Policymakers cannot keep passing alcohol industry priorities and expect law enforcement to make alcohol-related crashes and crime disappear. We need our elected officials to recognize their role in preventing these harms and pass evidence-based policies that will save lives and make our communities safer.