On December 7, 2006, in the final hours of the 109th Congress and nearly three years after its initial introduction, both houses of Congress passed the Sober Truth on Preventing (STOP) Underage Drinking Act (H.R. 864 / S. 408). The $18 million bill will:

- Establish a coordinated leadership role for the federal government to combat underage drinking via a Secretary-level Interagency Coordinating Committee;
- Require an annual report to better monitor progress on key underage drinking indicators, and survey state underage drinking prevention policies and programs;
- Authorize a national, adult-oriented media campaign to prevent underage drinking;
- Make funds available to communities and campuses to combat youth alcohol use;
- Fund additional scientific research on underage drinking.

The STOP Act was crafted by seven members of both parties in both houses of Congress: Senators Mike DeWine (R-OH) and Christopher Dodd (D-CT) and Representatives Lucille Roybal-Allard (D-34-CA), Frank Wolf (R-10-VA), Zach Wamp (R-3-TN), Tom Osborne (R-3-NE), and Rosa DeLauro (D-3-CT). The bill was inspired by the National Academies of Science’s 2003 landmark report on reducing underage drinking, which detailed a comprehensive and ambitious agenda to address the problem. However, in order to improve the bill’s hope of passage, it did not address some of that report’s most important, but politically sensitive, recommendations, including: a highly visible truly national-scale paid federal media campaign to highlight the issue of underage drinking, higher beer taxes to deter youth consumption and fund prevention and treatment, and restrictions on alcohol advertising.

Nonetheless, it does represent modest progress and establishes a platform on which to build a real axis of programs and policies to address underage drinking. Significantly, the STOP Act calls for federal coordination of the many disparate underage drinking programs that are now carried out across many departments of government; it provides for better monitoring of alcohol promotion and advertising placement in the media and for better understanding of state activities to reduce underage drinking. It grants small amounts of funds for additional community prevention activities and college prevention programs and expands the capacity of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism to conduct research on alcohol’s effects on young brains and the impact of alcohol advertising on young people. It sows the seeds for a national media campaign on underage drinking prevention, though in the form of $1 million public service announcement project developed – pro bono – by members of the Ad Council.

And, at the request of beer wholesalers, in exchange for their belated support of the bill after 3 years of opposition, it also lauds the three-tier alcohol distribution system and state regulation of alcohol as critical elements in the fight against underage drinking.
Certain of the bill’s original elements were lost or weakened in the months of negotiations leading up to its final passage. The STOP Act no longer contains extensive findings of harms related to underage drinking; it mentions alcohol advertising only once, and it no longer requires government (as it does for tobacco products) to collect information on youth brand preferences among alcohol products. The bill’s funding was reduced by $1 million, to $18 million per year. Another loss to industry objections was a non-binding sense of the Congress resolution asking the National Collegiate Athletic Association and college athletic programs voluntarily to eliminate alcohol advertising during televised college sporting events. Once the beer wholesalers and other lobbyists for other divisions of the alcoholic-beverage industry got involved in negotiations to move the bill in July, 2006, there were numerous attempts to further weaken the bill.

In the end, however, there was general consensus within the prevention community that the bill’s essential integrity and force of law remained intact. The new law, particularly in this past Congress, is nonetheless a significant achievement in itself, one that CSPI proudly shares with our lead co-sponsors and their talented, tireless and optimistic staff members, our allies in the National Alliance to Prevent Underage Drinking (MADD, CADCA, AMA, CAMY, Leadership to Keep Children Alcohol Free, National Association for Children of Alcoholics, Southern Baptist Convention and United Methodist Church, and many others. Especially essential to this win were the efforts of concerned organizations and individuals from around the country who helped recruit co-sponsors and keep the pressure on when that was needed.

We look forward to continuing to work with Congress and our allies to fully fund and implement the STOP Act and other key underage drinking prevention programs, as well as to tackle unfinished business.

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