

A Call to Action on the Nation's Number-One Youth Drug Problem
Responding to the NAS Report on Underage Drinking

Background

On September 10, 2003, the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) Institute of Medicine released its much-anticipated report to Congress recommending bold steps to address underage drinking, the nation's most costly and most neglected youth drug problem.

The report offers exciting opportunities for activists around the country to promote progressive policies on underage drinking at the federal, state and local levels. New federal leadership that focuses media, policy, and public attention on underage drinking directly strengthens community-level efforts. This action guide offers starting points for community groups to use the report to help create a local and national conversation about underage drinking. Please take action as soon as possible to best capitalize on the report's buzz.

See CSPI's Talking Points at: www.cspinet.org/booze/NAS_Action_TP.htm

Federal Action Needed

1. Fax letters to your U.S. Senators and Representatives. Let your members of Congress know of your interest in the NAS report, connecting it to related issues or activities in your home state or district. Urge them to support a hearing and action on its recommendations, specifically:

- Support the establishment of a national media campaign on underage drinking aimed at instilling a broad societal commitment to reduce underage drinking;
- Oppose reductions in excise taxes on beer and/or liquor;
- Promote voluntary and other alcohol advertising reforms and closer federal monitoring and reporting on alcohol advertising practices.

More resources are available at: www.cspinet.org/booze/NAS_Action_Resources.htm

2. Visit local Congressional offices. Late October through early December 2003 will be prime time for scheduling a meeting with the Senator or Representative or their staff, in the district office nearest you. Whether as an individual or in a small group, you can inform them of your interest in underage drinking prevention, educate them on how the problem affects your community, share your suggestions for how the legislator can assist on a federal level, and offer your help to his/her office on alcohol-related issues in general. The visit is an effective first step to build a solid relationship with your Member of Congress. If you would like tips on setting up and organizing such a visit, please contact Kim Miller at 202-332-9110, x338 or send her an email at kmiller@cspinet.org.

3. Attend Congressional town hall meetings. Make a point to attend the next town hall meeting or community forum your Senator or Representative hosts or attends (Congress is aiming to adjourn in early October, so check with their district or state offices on their schedule of appearances). Either as an individual or in a group, you can ask questions about your member of Congress' positions on alcohol-related concerns. Although letters and staff visits are very effective, direct interaction at town hall meetings often leaves an even bigger impression of constituent concerns on the legislator.

For more information on federal-level advocacy opportunities, please contact Kim Miller at 202-332-9110, x338 or send her an email at kmiller@cspinet.org.

Media

1. Send a letter to the editor of your local newspaper. Use the NAS report's release as a way to discuss local efforts to curb underage drinking. Talk about what still needs to be done, and who needs to do it, e.g., state policy makers, local leaders, the alcohol industry, parents, law enforcement, youth, etc.

See a sample letter to the editor at: www.cspinet.org/booze/NAS_Editor.htm

2. Write an opinion piece. If your paper allows for submissions, an opinion piece provides greater visibility and a better opportunity to make your case than a letter to the editor. Tie the NAS report to your community's needs.

3. Pitch the story to reporters. Now that federal leaders are paying increased attention to the crisis of underage drinking, call reporters you may have worked with in the past and propose a story on the federal report, combined with a look into local problems related to underage drinking. If you've made progress on reducing underage drinking in your community, tell them. If your coalition has already endorsed many of the report's recommendations, but is having difficulty making progress with local or state lawmakers, let them know. If there have been recent stories about the effects of underage drinking (drunk driving, accidents, arrests), remind them that this report offers sound and clear ways to reduce the incidence of these problems.

Note: If you don't have an existing relationship with the media outlet, talk to reporters who cover community activism, health, traffic safety, human interest stories, local and state policy, youth and families, or similar issues.

4. Meet with the editorial board of your local newspaper. An editorial on the report and its local implications is a very powerful way to highlight what needs to be done to reduce underage drinking. Your job is to convince the editors that this issue is timely, relevant, and that their opinion is needed to galvanize public opinion and action.

If you would like more guidance on how to set up and structure a visit with an editorial board, contact Amy Gotwals at 202-332-9110, x348 or send her an email at agotwals@cspinet.org.

State Policy

The NAS report's call for raising state excise taxes on alcohol, particularly on beer, lends fresh impetus to initiatives to state tax initiatives. CSPI has a helpful citizen's action guide to raising state alcohol taxes, and substantial web and other resources to assist your campaign. Please contact Amy Gotwals, Manager of Grassroots Advocacy, at 202-332-9110, x348 or send her an email at agotwals@cspinet.org for further information and guidance.

1. Send a letter to your Governor. The letter can be from an individual, a community group, or a coalition of organizations. Highlight the federal report and urge your governor to implement the state efforts recommended in the NAS report: alcohol excise tax increases, additional funding for community mobilization efforts, and a host of enforcement and access-oriented interventions (e.g., keg registration, dram shop liability laws, sobriety check points, and social host liability laws). While all the recommendations are important, you may wish to identify your priorities and focus on one or two that are most likely to be adopted in your state; urge your governor to work with you to implement needed policy changes.

2. Contact your state legislators. Send separate letters to all your state legislators, again urging new or strengthened state efforts to reduce underage drinking. Offer to work with the legislator by providing information and grassroots contacts. Make sure your priorities match what you asked of the governor.

3. Gain support from local leaders. If relevant, move your issue at the local level. For example, community mobilization, youth access, and law enforcement issues can often be addressed by local mayors, city councils, county boards, chiefs of police, or other leaders.

Community Organizing

1. Hold a community meeting. Although underage drinking is nothing new, sometimes it takes a novel hook to reach people who aren't fully aware of what needs to be done and what they can do to help. Make the release of the report the driving force behind a community meeting. The agenda might include a review of the findings of the report, local data and stories about underage drinking, and a discussion of the report's recommendations. Then, depending on your audience and the needs of your community, either 1) have the group debate and discuss how the community might respond to the recommendations, or 2) present your group's priorities and projects and ask the new attendees to become involved in those efforts.

2. Recruit new allies. The fact that federal policymakers are now focusing on underage drinking provides a great opportunity for you to enlist the support of new allies. Send letters and copies of the report to, then schedule meetings with, local leaders, law enforcement officers, the PTA, teachers, merchants, religious leaders, youth groups, neighborhood associations, health advocacy groups and practitioners, prevention and treatment professionals, or whomever you need on board to make your coalition most effective.

3. Revive old coalitions. If your coalition hasn't been particularly active lately, use the report's policy recommendations to revitalize the group. Perhaps this is the time to start a new campaign to educate policymakers about alcohol excise taxes in your state. The report concludes that excise tax increases reduce underage consumption.

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