August 5, 2002

The Honorable John P. Walters  
Director  
Office of National Drug Control Policy  
Executive Office of the President  
750 17th Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20503

Dear Mr. Walters:

We learned in the last *Campaign Update* on the Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign (Summer 2002) about ONDCP’s partnership with NASCAR and driver Jimmy Spencer to bring anti-drug messages to young NASCAR fans. This collaboration with beer promoters shows extremely poor judgment because beer is the major drug problem affecting young people in America today. We respectfully urge you to reconsider the arrangement immediately.

This partnership sends the wrong message to America’s young people. NASCAR has a $7.5 million sponsorship deal with Busch beer and many drivers have their own lucrative sponsorship deals with brewers. For example, Rusty Wallace partners with Miller Brewing Co. and Sterling Martin plugs Coors. Brewers also advertise heavily on televised NASCAR events. Ironically, a photo of Jimmy Spencer’s car, featured in ONDCP’s *Campaign Update*, sports a Budweiser decal.

ONDCP’s anti-drug message to young people can not hope to compete with NASCAR’s non-stop reminders to drink beer. Beer brand logos are omnipresent on NASCAR drivers’ uniforms, cars, infield equipment, and kid-friendly promotional items such as caps, T-shirts, and toy cars.

ONDCP’s collaboration with NASCAR abandons years of acknowledgment of alcohol and tobacco as serious drug threats for young people. ONDCP’s 1999 Drug Control Strategy recognized that alcohol “is by far the drug of choice among American youth.” Alcohol causes by far the greatest harm, killing six times more kids than all illicit drugs combined. Beer, in particular, is the favorite alcoholic beverage of young people in this country, and underage consumers purchase approximately 10 percent of all the beer sold. According to the most recent Youth Risk Behavior Survey, more than 55 percent of 12th grade students reported monthly alcohol use and more than one-third said they drink heavily. Despite modest recent declines in underage alcohol consumption, young people continue to drink at alarming rates — and continue to suffer the consequences.
Promoting the Campaign’s anti-drug message alongside promotions for beer sends the mixed message that illegal drugs are bad, but drinking beer is OK. This new strategy seems consistent with ONDCP’s misguided abandonment of its prior, principal goal of “educating America’s youth to reject illegal drugs as well as alcohol and tobacco” (italicized language dropped in the 2002 strategy). ONDCP’s NASCAR connection implicitly legitimizes the promotion of beer to underage consumers and seriously undermines the meager private and public resources that are now directed to combating underage drinking.

It’s bad enough that ONDCP’s $1 billion national media campaign ignores the drug that is most likely to kill or maim young people. But that omission is aggravated many times over by the agency’s tacit implication, in its collaboration with beer-saturated NASCAR, that beer is an acceptable choice for young people.

Again, we respectfully urge you to reevaluate the Campaign’s partnership with NASCAR. We also ask that the ONDCP consider including alcohol-prevention messages in the paid portion of ONDCP’s Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign. Thank you for your attention to this issue.

Sincerely,

George A. Hacker
Director
Alcohol Policies Project

cc: The Honorable Joseph Biden
   The Honorable Richard Durbin
   The Honorable Mike Dewine
   The Honorable Byron Dorgan
   The Honorable Joseph Lieberman
   The Honorable Robert Byrd
   The Honorable Fritz Hollings
   The Honorable Frank Wolf
   The Honorable Lucille Roybal-Allard
   The Honorable Mark Souder
   The Honorable Ernest Istook
   The Honorable Bob Barr
   Mr. Steve Pasierb, Partnership for a Drug-Free America
   General Arthur Dean, Ret., Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America
   Ms. Wendy Hamilton, President, Mothers Against Drunk Driving
   Mr. Geoffrey M. Laredo, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism
   Mr. Steven G. Wing, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
   Ms. Margaret La Montagne, White House Domestic Policy Council