

Stopping Underage Drinking Takes Team Effort
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John Greiner's article in the August 1 edition of *The Oklahoman*, *Minor drinking, major problem*, calls attention to the issue of underage drinking in Oklahoma, an issue our beer distributors are serious about solving.

Across Oklahoma, local beer distributors work with state regulators, retail partners, brewers and others in the community to prevent underage drinking by sponsoring programs ranging from alcohol-free after-prom events to providing educational materials to parents to assist them in talking to their children about underage drinking. Distributors also promote alcohol education initiatives in schools and community centers.

Because retail establishments are on the front lines in the fight against underage drinking, beer distributors also teach retail employees to recognize false identification cards and sponsor training for alcohol beverage servers. In 2006 the Oklahoma Malt Beverage Association (OMBA) was on the front lines in support of legislation to stiffen penalties against those who sell 3.2 beer to minors. The bill, signed by Governor Henry, allows Oklahoma prosecutors to charge servers with a felony and punish offenders with a fine up to \$5,000 and five years in prison.

Oklahoma's beer distributors operate within a system controlled by the state which is responsible for regulating alcohol beverage sales and distribution and administering prevention and treatment activities in Oklahoma communities. As society addresses underage drinking, the importance of maintaining effective state alcohol regulation is critical. The Governor's Task Force on Prevention of Underage Drinking that met in 2006 is scheduled to meet again this year and it is our hope the task force will include representation from the beer industry in order to make the best recommendation possible to accomplish our common goal of reducing underage access to alcohol.

The state-based system of alcohol regulation provides a transparent and accountable chain of custody in the sale and distribution of alcohol, making it easier to enforce state laws and local ordinances. Local officials and state regulators, such as the Oklahoma Tax Commission and the Alcohol Beverage Law Enforcement Commission (ABLE), are best equipped to enforce laws and address crimes involving underage drinking.

Last December, America's beer distributors, with support from OMBA, helped pass the Sober Truth on Preventing Underage Drinking Act (STOP Act) that was signed into law by President Bush (Public Law No. 109-422). The STOP Act calls for existing federal funds to be used to fight underage drinking. Beer distributors are currently working with Congress to ensure the STOP Act's full funding and implementation.

Over the past 20 years, the combined efforts of beer distributors, brewers, retailers, state regulators, parents, teachers, government officials, law enforcement and community leaders have helped significantly reduce underage drinking. OMBA vows to continue to do its part, working with these advocates to increase awareness of the dangers of underage drinking and the consequences that await those who sell alcohol to minors. Oklahoma is not alone in confronting this situation but it can be a leader in conquering it. Oklahoma's beer distributors are providing the leadership to make it happen.