

Bush Signs STOP Act into Law - December 22, 2006  
News Summary

The STOP (Sober Truth on Preventing) Underage Drinking Act, called the most significant piece of underage-drinking prevention legislation passed by Congress in years, has been signed into law by President Bush.

Bush signed the bill on Dec. 20, 2006. The STOP Act establishes a national media campaign aimed at underage drinking, funds underage-drinking prevention programs in communities, and requires the Department of Health and Human Services to report annually on progress against youth drinking.

"Today's historic signing into law of our nation's first comprehensive legislation on underage drinking is a significant step toward bringing this national public-health crisis out of the shadows," said Rep. Lucille Roybal-Allard (D-CA), the lead sponsor of the bill. "Prior to being elected to public office, I worked for a nonprofit agency which focused on alcohol abuse. I witnessed firsthand the many devastating consequences of irresponsible drinking. That experience made me realize that, as a nation, we must no longer be complacent about underage drinking and its alarming consequences."

The STOP Act enacts into law some of the recommendations from an Institute of Medicine study on youth drinking. The bill was endorsed both by public-health groups and alcohol-industry representatives.

Some opponents claimed the bill was duplicative of other federal grant programs, but Rep. Tom Osborne (R-Neb.), one of the primary cosponsors of the STOP measure, said the issue of underage drinking cries out for more attention.

"The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated the number of underage deaths due to excessive alcohol use at 4,554 a year. That is more than six times the rate of death in Iraq and Afghanistan," noted Osborne.

"We have agonized on this floor over that death rate, and yet we are having six times more young people die every year, and it is sort of something that doesn't capture our attention.

"Alcohol kills six times more young people than all other illegal drugs combined," added Osborne.

"So the federal government, in response, spends 25 times more annually to combat youth drug use ... than it does to prevent underage alcohol use, which is \$1.8 billion on the drug side versus \$71 million on the alcohol side. That doesn't make sense ... this is the biggest problem we have as far as our young people, and yet we are spending a drop in the bucket compared to what we are spending on other drugs."

The bill was supported by groups like Mothers Against Drunk Driving, the Center for Science in the Public Interest, Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America, the Center for Alcohol Marketing to Youth, and the American Medical Association, as well as alcohol industry groups like the Wine & Spirits Wholesalers of America, the National Beer Wholesalers Association, the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States, and the Beer Institute.

The industry supported the key prevention aspects of the bill, but succeeded in getting allies in Congress to delete legislative "findings" from the measure that detailed the harm caused by underage alcohol use.

Industry supporters also added language that supported the Prohibition-era, "three-tiered" alcohol distribution system that includes wholesalers as the middleman in most alcohol sales.

"This bill is a great start in moving our nation towards the goal of decreasing youth access to, and consumption of, alcohol," said Rep. Tammy Baldwin (D-Wis.), one of the cosponsors of the legislation. "It has the endorsement of both the alcohol-beverage industry and a number of key public-health advocates, both committed to the idea that a multifaceted national effort is key to making progress in curbing underage alcohol consumption."

Kim Miller, manager of federal relations for CSPI's Alcohol Policies Project, called the STOP Act a "modest but significant step forward for collective efforts of the past several years to secure implementation of the National Academy of Sciences Institute of Medicine's recommendations for a national plan to reduce underage drinking."

"It's a foot in the door, and something to build on," she told Join Together.

The STOP Act calls for:

- a \$1-million annual national media campaign on underage drinking (similar to the White House's national antidrug media campaign, primarily aimed at marijuana);
- \$5 million in grants to help community coalitions address underage drinking. This program would be run by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration in consultation with the Office of National Drug Control Policy.
- another \$5 million in grant funding to prevent alcohol abuse at institutions of higher education;
- an annual report on state underage-drinking prevention and enforcement activities. The report would judge state efforts based on such factors as whether they have adequate laws in place regarding underage alcohol use, possession, and consumption; comprehensive and well-enforced server-liability laws; compliance checks on alcohol retailers; server training; laws to deter adults from providing alcohol to minors; and if states have graduated drivers-license programs
- establishing a federal interagency coordinating committee on underage drinking; and authorizing \$6 million for research on underage drinking, including gathering data on the involvement of alcohol in unnatural deaths among 12- to 20-year-olds.

Sens. Mike DeWine (R-Ohio) and Christopher Dodd (D-Conn.) have sponsored companion legislation, S-408, in the Senate. Supporters are hoping to get the measure passed on a unanimous-consent motion in the Senate before the current Congress ends, but that plan could be derailed if Senate lawmakers insist on making any changes to the bill.

CSPI's Miller called the bill's fate in the Senate "a cliffhanger," adding that the Bush administration has so far been silent about whether the President would sign the STOP bill.

For a PDF version of House Bill 864 click on this website:  
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