

Subcommittee on Substance Abuse hearing on Underage Drinking

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Witness:

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Boise, Idaho

Testimony:

As the First Lady of Idaho, thank you for your invitation to speak to you today on behalf of the 34 current Governors' spouses and 11 Emeritus members of the Leadership to Keep Children Alcohol Free national initiative.

I would like to acknowledge the support shown by many of our members who are here today in commitment to this issue.

We are a non-partisan group devoted to increasing public awareness, engaging policy makers, and mobilizing action to stop childhood drinking. Our specific focus is the 9-15 year-old age group. The Leadership to Keep Children Alcohol Free was established to make childhood drinking prevention a national health priority. In addition to their role as Governors' Spouses, Leadership members are prosecutors, judges, educators, business leaders, substance abuse prevention specialists, and parents. Many of us have witnessed through our respective professions or personally the devastation early alcohol abuse can inflict on individuals, families, and society. We are here today to emphasize for the Committee the immediate and far reaching consequences of childhood drinking and also to offer our recommendations for action.

We are pleased that the Subcommittee on Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services understands the need to address underage drinking in all its complexity, including early onset of alcohol use by the most vulnerable members of our society – children.

On a personal note as a parent, as a community encourager, and as a proponent for the health and well-being of children I would like to express my thanks to the committee and acknowledge the need for your leadership in addressing this issue. During most of my childhood my father worked as a distributor of wine and distilled spirits. It was very clear to me at the time that alcohol was not meant for me as a child. Growing up I learned a respect for alcohol as an adult beverage but also saw some of the effects of the abuse of alcohol on members of my community. Seeing the hurt and confusion caused by the abuse of alcohol was instructive in helping me make choices in my life. I do not believe today the message in our society is as clear.

While it is unsettling to think that we have to consider elementary students when we think about drinking prevention, we do. The environment surrounding our children often contributes to their attitudes and expectancies about alcohol. In addition, drinking initiation most often begins at the age of 13. We know from research that behaviors adopted during adolescence set a lifelong trajectory.

Before you say 'but I've never seen a drunk 12 year old', let me share some statistics. More than 29 percent of students report that they first drank alcohol (more than a few sips) before age 13. By the eighth grade (that's 13-14 year olds), more than 12 % report having had five or more drinks in a row, that's binge drinking within two weeks prior of being surveyed. They are drinking with the goal of getting drunk.

Children are our top priority. We expend tremendous energy ensuring that they are vaccinated, use infant car seats, and have access to educational opportunities. Yet there is a serious disconnect when it comes to childhood drinking.

Some propose that the solution is to adopt the so-called European model in which drinking age laws and attitudes are more liberal. The argument is that these policies and attitudes in turn foster more responsible styles of drinking by young people. That is a myth.

In a study conducted in 1995, 15-16 year-olds in 22 European countries were asked about consuming 5 or more drinks in a row. Compared with the U.S., only a single country, Portugal, had a lower percentage of kids report this behavior. In addition, the World Health Organization report released in 2002 states that one in four deaths among European men aged 15-29 years is alcohol related. This is not the model we should emulate. Moreover, governments around the world, including in Europe, are beginning to take action to address underage drinking.

The phone call in the middle of the night is the fear of every parent. What may not be immediately obvious, but just as devastating, are the long-term irreversible consequences of heavy drinking during adolescence.

Research documents that forty percent of kids who begin drinking before the age of 15 will develop alcohol abuse or dependence at some point in their lives. The adolescent brain is still a work in progress and therefore vulnerable. More recent research demonstrated that children who engaged in heavy drinking by age 15, showed noticeable changes in the brain and that these children developed fewer learning strategies and remembered less than non-drinkers. In addition, those who begin drinking before age 14 are 12 times more likely to be injured after drinking, 7 times more likely to be in motor vehicle crash, and 11 times more likely to be in a physical fight. Alcohol use also leads to other risky behaviors with life changing consequences such as unplanned pregnancies or infectious sexually transmitted diseases. And finally, 28% of suicides and attempted suicides by children can be attributed to alcohol.

Starting to drink at an early age poses risk not only for those who drink, but there is a second-hand negative effect on the non-drinking adolescent.

While parents certainly bear responsibility for their own children, families do not live in a vacuum; our homes are not bunkers from reality. Parental guidance is constantly challenged by external influences. We are not here to place blame but to address a serious public health issue that is affecting a significant number of our nation's young people. The responsibility for solving this problem rests with all of us – individuals, families, schools, communities, policy-makers, opinion-leaders, retailers, and the industry. The National Academies of Science and the Institute of Medicine have identified opportunities for all of us to play a role in tackling the problem of underage drinking as we are all stakeholders in the future of our nation's youth. We need to be motivated by what is in the best interests of our youth.

On behalf of the Leadership to Keep Children Alcohol Free and speaking as a parent, I would respectfully offer four recommendations for action:

Please do not let this be the only hearing on this critical public health issue, but rather the impetus for a series of hearings leading to significant policy deliberations and proposals.

We request that the Subcommittee ask the Surgeon General to issue an independent evaluation and “Call to Action on Childhood Drinking” and that the resulting report be released in a timely way.

We request that national surveys begin to collect data on alcohol use and attitudes that include children as young as age 9.

When used by our youth alcohol is the #1 illegal drug. Therefore, we urge the Subcommittee to support increased funding for research, prevention, and treatment. It is time to increase the nation’s investment on this issue and to bring it in line with what is spent on illicit drugs and tobacco.

Each one of us can make a difference to ensure that our nation’s children have a strong foundation for life. Delaying the start of alcohol use is a critical step in doing so. Please do not be swayed by those who argue this is not a serious problem. Our children are drinking at younger and younger ages and that should be a concern for all of us.

Thank you.