

March 21, 2003

House Judiciary Committee
Hearing on SB 407

Dear Ms. Chairman and Members of the Committee,

My name is Jenny Haubenreiser and I serve as the Director of Health Promotion at Montana State University in Bozeman. This office is part of the Student Health Service and is charged with preventing a variety of health risks associated with the college population. While we address issues such as sexual assault, sexual health, and violence, alcohol is clearly the number one public health issue, both on campus and within the community. Alcohol is typically involved in much of the preventable harm that occurs among young people. This is true nationally, and is not limited to college-age students – this also affects high school youth and other community members who regularly interact with college students.

In 2003, the state passed a much needed stronger MIP law that would strengthen individual consequences while providing the essential education and intervention needed to help prevent future harm. Unfortunately, underage youth aged 18 – 20 were excluded from this bill, which essentially omits a serious proportion of the problem. College students under the age of 21 are at equal if not greater risk of alcohol-related harm since this is often the first time they are away from home. This makes early intervention and education all the more important for this segment of underage drinkers.

I have been working in the field of prevention for over ten years, during which time I have followed the most current research related to effective prevention in higher education. The economic, personal, and social costs of this problem have made this work not only important, but federally mandated. The negative consequences of alcohol are far too serious, not only to our students, but their peers, their families, and our local communities.

Fortunately, as a field, we do know the most effective strategies include strong laws and policies. It is essential that youth of all ages get the message that illegal drinking will have consequences. Unfortunately, the current law has fallen short of this by excluding those with potentially the greatest risk. Higher fines, license suspension, community service, and mandatory education comprise some of the best actions we can take to increase individual accountability, while we also try to change the culture of illegal and high risk alcohol use that plagues our state.

I ask for your support of SB 407. This can only have a positive impact on the problem of underage drinking. We must allow the current law to achieve its full protective potential by including all youth under the age of 21. This is a critical opportunity to better protect our youth, while increasing the safety and well being of the communities where we all reside.

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