

CONTACT: Kurt Gregory Erickson
President

PHONE: W. 703-893-0461
CELL. 703-625-2303

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MARYLAND BILL SEEKS TO ALLOW ALCOHOL SERVICE TO UNDERAGE MILITARY MEMBERS

LEGISLATION TO BE HEARD BY SENATE COMMITTEE FRIDAY; LOCAL ALCOHOL EDUCATION GROUP OPPOSES MEASURE

Annapolis, MD, Feb. 25 – A Maryland Senate Committee is scheduled Friday to hear a bill which, if passed into law, would allow 18, 19 and 20 year old members of the military to drink beer and wine at on premise establishments in the state.

The legislation (SB 213ⁱ), introduced by Frederick State Senator Ronald Young (D), seeks to allow Maryland's bars and restaurants to "sell or furnish beer or wine for consumption on the premises" to active duty military personnel 18 years of age or older. The bill is slated to be heard by Maryland Senate's Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee Friday afternoon in Annapolis.

Safe-to-say, the measure has drawn the ire of organizations combating drunk driving and underage drinking in Maryland.

"Supporting our troops and supporting the minimum legal drinking age are not mutually exclusive," said Kurt Gregory Erickson, President of the Maryland nonprofit Washington Regional Alcohol Program (WRAP), registered Maryland lobbyist and opponent of SB 213.

Opponents argue that the carving-out of a special dispensation for underage persons currently serving in the military to be sold or furnished alcoholic beverages – a currently unlawful act not just in Maryland but in all 50 U.S. States as well as the District of Columbia – comes at the costs of both jeopardized federal funding and public health.

Federal "Minimum National Drinking Age" statutes (23 U.S.C. 158)ⁱⁱ require states to disallow the purchase or possession of alcoholic beverages by persons under 21 years of age. Maryland's falling-out of compliance with federal minimum legal drinking age laws puts the state at risk of losing over \$ 30 millionⁱⁱⁱ in federal highway funding this current fiscal year, alone.

"Federal penalties aside, the larger issue surrounding this legislation is what the American Medical Association has labeled as a preponderance of evidence to support the minimum legal drinking age of 21 as an important public health provision of the United States," said Erickson.

The National Highway Traffic Administration estimates that minimum legal drinking age laws have “reduced alcohol traffic fatalities by 13-percent and have saved an estimated 29,292 lives since 1975.”^{iv}

While opponents of SB 213 concede that “it’s not always about driving after drinking,” they equally argue that it is about general injury and mortality risk.

“Evidence shows that youth who drink alcohol participate in other risky behaviors including driving while impaired, riding in a car with a drunk driver and, via impaired judgments about sex and contraception, placing them at increased risk for HIV infection, other sexually-transmitted diseases and unplanned pregnancies,” said Erickson.

Such risk-taking, according to a 2009 National Institutes of Health study^v, is presumably “exacerbated when one subgroup within a population is legally allowed alcohol and the other subgroup is prohibited from it”. And when that subgroup is underage military personnel, it’s a potentially dangerous equation as a 2008 U.S. Centers for Disease Control-cited American Medical Association study^{vi} found that “more than half of all active duty military personnel report binge drinking in the past month and young adult service members exposed to combat are at significantly greater risk of binge drinking than older service members.”

Founded in 1982, the Maryland nonprofit Washington Regional Alcohol Program is an award-winning public-private partnership working to prevent drunk driving and underage drinking in the Washington-metropolitan area. Through public education, innovative health education programs and advocacy, WRAP is credited with keeping the metro-Washington area’s alcohol-related traffic deaths consistently lower than the national average. WRAP, however, may best be known to area residents via the organization’s popular free cab ride service for would-be drunk drivers, SoberRide®.

For more information, visit WRAP’s web site at www.wrap.org.

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ⁱ <http://mgaleg.maryland.gov/2015RS/bills/sb/sb0213F.pdf>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/granule/USCODE-2011-title23/USCODE-2011-title23-chap1-sec158>

ⁱⁱⁱ http://mgaleg.maryland.gov/2015RS/fnotes/bil_0003/sb0213.pdf

^{iv} <http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/Pubs/812019.pdf>

^v <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2631100/>

^{vi} <http://www.cdc.gov/alcohol/fact-sheets/minimum-legal-drinking-age.htm>