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## **VIRGINIA LAWMAKERS REBUFF EFFORTS** **TO CRACK-DOWN ON TEEN DRINKING**

### ***GENERAL ASSEMBLY PUNTS ON BILLS PENALIZING UNDERAGE DRINKERS AND THEIR PROVIDERS***

**Richmond, VA, Feb. 20** – Despite a number of high-profile and deadly underage drinking incidents in central Virginia this winter, Virginia lawmakers this year have snubbed bills to increase penalties for teen drinkers in the state as well as their providers.

With yesterday's midnight deadline for House and Senate committees to advance legislation in Virginia's General Assembly this year, bills mandating six-month driver's license suspensions for both underage drinkers put on probation in Virginia (**HB 1887**, Albo) as well as for those unlawfully providing alcohol to those underage (**HB 2860**, Moran) each died in committee this session.

This year's "provision" bill was killed via some parliamentary maneuvering which had Virginia's House of Delegate's Courts of Justice Committee originally pass the measure in a 17-to-two vote only to have the bill re-referred to the committee as a means of killing it. Meanwhile, the bill mandating minimum driver's license suspension periods for underage drinkers put on probation via a judge's deferred finding (a penalty already applied to those teen drinkers convicted of the crime) was left languishing in the Senate's Courts of Justice Committee after unanimously being passed in Virginia's House of Delegates and following a spirited committee debate on the same last week.

***"Teen drinkers and their providers were each given a reprieve in Virginia this year,"*** said Kurt Gregory Erickson, President of the Virginia-based Washington Regional Alcohol Program (WRAP), registered Virginia lobbyist and a proponent of anti-drunk driving and underage drinking legislation.

According to Virginia's Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services' 2005 *Virginia Community Youth Survey*, alcohol is the "most commonly used substance" by Virginia teens citing that 76-percent of Virginia's high school seniors and 64-percent of the Commonwealth's 10<sup>th</sup> graders reported using alcohol. In addition, more than one-quarter (27.8%) of Virginia's 12<sup>th</sup> graders reported consuming five or more drinks in a row within the reporting period's past two weeks.

In news of other alcohol-related bills this session, bills to both require convicted drunk drivers with ignition interlock systems to maintain such systems for six months without failing tests prior to their driver's license reinstatement (**HB 3098**, Iaquinto) and have the "count" of multiple DUI offenses based on the dates of the actual incidents versus conviction dates (**HB 1890**, Albo) both passed the Senate yesterday (after previously passing the House). In addition, measures focusing on boating the influence (BUI) including the creation of a new Class 6 felony penalty for maiming while operating a

watercraft while intoxicated (**HB 2978**, Bell) and allowing law enforcement more time to obtain such tests for intoxication (**SB 1314**, Reynolds) following alleged BUI offenses are both en route to Virginia Governor Timothy Kaine (D) for his consideration.

Meanwhile, this year, Virginia lawmakers killed or let die a spectrum of anti-drunk driving legislation this session including bills seeking to:

- increase the jail time sentences (**HB 2329**, Gilbert), eliminate the current ten-year statute of limitations (**HB 2875**, McEachin) as well as mandate special license plates (**HB 2907**, Spruill) for repeat drunk drivers in Virginia;
- create a Class 5 felony penalty for those drunk drivers feloniously eluding police (**HB 1987**, Cox);
- disallow open containers of alcohol in the passenger areas of motor vehicles (**HB 1676**, Purkey);
- allow official highway signs memorializing victims of drunk driving (**HB 2340**, Abbitt);
- and require that blood alcohol concentration (BAC) levels in drunk driving cases be based at the time of *testing* versus the presumed time of driving (**HB 3049**, Albo).

Founded in 1982, the non-profit and McLean, Virginia-based Washington Regional Alcohol Program is a two-time winner of Virginia's prestigious Governor's Transportation Safety Award as well project manager of the Commonwealth's statewide *Checkpoint Strikeforce* campaign. As a public-private partnership, WRAP works to prevent drunk driving and underage drinking in the Washington-metropolitan area including in Northern Virginia however the organization may best be known to area residents via its popular free cab ride service for would-be drunk drivers, *SoberRide*. For more information, visit WRAP's web site at [www.wrap.org](http://www.wrap.org).

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