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## **States Demand Public Health Not Public Drinking**

### **COVID-19 Alcohol Deregulation Should Not Become the New Normal**

SAN FRANCISCO, CA (August 26, 2020) – Health and community advocates from around the country held a virtual press event today to send strong messages to the nation’s governors that #COVID19 alcohol deregulations are dangerous, place alcohol industry profits above public health and safety, and must not become the new normal.

*“As Public Health understands, bar openings where people congregate, socialize, often without masks and social distancing, are hot spots for new COVID-19 spreading events, furthering the pandemic,”* stated **Tom K. Greenfield, PhD**, Scientific Director, [Alcohol Research Group](#), Public Health Institute. *“We must not make this mistake again by premature re-openings. In addition, the creep of bars into outdoor spaces around the bar such as parking lots and sidewalks brings with it its own public health risks through increased availability. [Together with other ‘regulatory relief’ in the alcohol sector](#), such as ‘cocktails to go’ these regulations should not become permanent. We know from numerous rigorous studies that increased availability leads to increased drinking and increased alcohol-related mental health and domestic violence problems, as well as leading to greater access by youth.”*

[Alcohol consumption has increased dramatically under COVID](#) as deregulation has made it easier than ever to purchase. This indicates a serious failure by many state governors and top state agencies to acknowledge and address public health and safety concerns by often declaring alcohol sales “essential” during the pandemic. The catastrophic [annual alcohol-related harms](#) that already plague the country have for the most part been dismissed along with the rise in those harms being experienced because alcohol was deemed essential. These harms are compounded by the fact that [alcohol misuse makes individuals more likely to contract COVID-19, and more likely to have a severe case](#). Similarly, [the impact of COVID on the healthcare system makes people who already overconsume alcohol much more likely to experience severe alcohol-related health consequences](#).

*“In California, the buck stops at Governor Gavin Newsom. The Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control and the Department of Public Health are under his jurisdiction,”* stated **Gilbert Mora**, Co-Chair, CAPA, the [California Alcohol Policy Alliance](#). *“Our statewide alliance refuses to allow alcohol deregulation to become the new normal. We demand that the regulatory relief measures be taken back, we ask for a temporary closure of alcohol establishments that put lives at risk, and most importantly, we ask for an alcohol COVID-19 response based on science not profits. **Alcohol sales are not essential. Lives are essential.**”* Mora went on to note that, according to a new study from the Institute for Public Strategies and Alcohol Justice, [alcohol harm under COVID seems to be a greater threat to ethnic and racial minorities, and may be directly tied to state deregulatory policies](#).

*“In an attempt to help Michigan alcohol establishments, legislators enacted deregulation policies such as cocktails to go and social districts,”* stated **Barry Schmidt**, Co-Chair, [Michigan Coalition to Reduce Underage Drinking](#) and Project Director with the [Neighborhood Resource Center of Bay County](#). *“With alcohol deregulation comes increased access and with that increased problems. In cocktails to go some businesses have decided to offer ‘Booze in a Bag’. **Are cocktails to go the new juice box for adults?** We urge our governor and legislators from the great state of Michigan to put public health first and not let a temporary fix become a permanent problem.”*

*“Illinois has aggressive COVID-19 policies and we have not seen the egregious industry moves for drastic measures to open up alcohol availability as have California and Ohio,”* said [Don Zeigler, PhD](#), Adjunct Associate Professor in the School of Public Health at the University of Illinois at Chicago. *“But Illinois has responded to business pressures with some potentially detrimental policies. All licensed retailers in Illinois, including those with licenses for on-premises alcohol service, are now authorized to conduct packaged sales, ‘to go’ sales even allowing mixed drinks/cocktails, curbside deliveries, home residential deliveries, and any other similar sales or delivery, albeit intended to promote sales while maintaining social distancing. These are considered ‘Temporary Deliveries’. We’ll see how temporary they are. **We are concerned that what we do to support the economy might lead to further changes in alcohol availability regulations that become permanent and increase consumption and have negative health and social implications in Illinois.**”*

In Florida, [Jason Wilson, MD](#), Tampa General Hospital, recounted his experience as an emergency physician with Tampa Bay reopening bars too early: *“[A]s soon as we were able to get things under control in the Tampa area, we reopened bars. And what we saw from that was a very quick, accelerated, exponential climb in cases. Of course with all the bars ... you have every other major risk factor for COVID all taking place at the same time: tight indoor space, people being inebriated, people being disinhibited, getting close together, talking loudly. And what we see from that are superspreader events. So if you go back to May or June in this area, we were getting things under control, **we opened up bars early, we saw a number of superspreader events that were directly traced to those bars. ... If we want to get COVID under control we have to pay attention to what’s going on in bars.**”*

Warnings from both the [U.S. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism](#) and [the World Health Organization](#) make it clear that alcohol use both increases risk of COVID-related illness and causes mental health and safety issues. State regulations form the first line of defense against these threats, but community health advocates worry that states are abdicating their roles in advancing public wellbeing.

*“Pennsylvania is an alcoholic beverage control state with wine and spirits to be sold only in the state-owned stores. But COVID has opened the door for legislative discussions on privatization of alcohol,”* stated **Jeff Hanley**, Executive Director, [Commonwealth Prevention Alliance](#). *“We need to continue to support the controlled state model and the PA Liquor Control Board with their excellent jobs and benefits. Alcohol consumption can increase during stressful times and may be mistaken as coping. During the pandemic there are added factors of job loss, reduced income, youth education, and easy access to alcohol that is likely intensifying those factors and leading to misuse. **The need for Prevention and Public Health is NOW.**”*

*“In Ohio we are currently facing a series of legislative proposals that would result in massive, long-lasting deregulation of alcohol policies across the board including extending sales hours for alcoholic beverages from 2 to 4 a.m. on Saturday and Sunday, and expand alcohol sales to 24-hours through local elections,”* said **J.P. Dorval**, Advocacy and Public Policy Liaison at [Prevention Action Alliance](#). *“At the same time, we’re seeing a surge of behavioral health issues, overdose deaths, suicides, and texts to the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services’ Crisis Text Line. Considering these struggles, the last thing our state should do is increase access to a substance that is known to be used as a harmful coping mechanism to the uncertainty, pain, and struggle brought on by this pandemic. We understand the financial difficulty our state is facing, but deregulating alcohol will only cause more problems now and down the road. **I urge Governor DeWine and our legislature to look at these proposals through a public health lens and to act with the health and safety of Ohio’s citizens in their decision-making process.**”*

*“Like many other states, Minnesota bars and restaurants, and the many servers and sellers they employ, are suffering economically under COVID-19 restrictions and like most states, Minnesota has relaxed regulations to help small businesses,”* stated **Linda Bosma, PhD**, [Bosma Consulting, LLC](#). *“But reopening has come with some challenges: In July in Minnesota, nearly 1,000 COVID-19 cases were connected to just 14 bars after reopening. We are NOT anti-business...but we must be sure that addressing economic problems is not done at the cost of increased alcohol abuse and addiction in our communities. Alcohol deregulation cannot be the new normal; we know regulating alcohol service saves lives and reduces alcohol-related harm, so relaxed measures must be temporary; and finally, as businesses reopen, they must have sound COVID prevention plans to prevent the spread and address any positive cases quickly. **Bars and restaurants are important parts of our communities —as part of the community, we all need to be sure they are protecting the community members. Re-open safe, smart, and make decisions informed by public health.**”*

In a pre-taped statement, **Will Jones III, MPA**, Communications and Outreach Associate at [SAM in Washington, D.C.](#) stated *“...special interests are pushing for these regulatory relaxations to become the new normal and this raises serious public health concerns and is not supported by science. Addiction-for-profit industries like alcohol, tobacco and marijuana disproportionately target communities of color with their products and*

stores. This is something I'm reminded of every day simply by leaving my house and seeing that the first store that I get to in any direction is a liquor store. **In the midst of a worldwide pandemic, these companies have continued their exploitive practices successfully lobbying to have their stores and products deemed essential. Now more than ever we should work together to hold these industries accountable, and not allow them to continue to harm public health.**"

In many parts of the country, public health and safety have taken a back seat to "economic recovery", and the drivers of this dangerous alcohol deregulation are GUI - Government Under the Influence. Since the beginning of the pandemic shutdown, under the dubious guise of economic relief, states have deregulated and relaxed enforcement to help alcohol licensed establishments continue to operate. These dangerous, revenue-driven policy changes have promoted increased alcohol sales and consumption during the stay-at-home orders. They include allowing home deliveries with ineffective age verification, cocktails-to-go, expanding sales into public spaces, and the normalization of drinking during a public health emergency of massive proportions.

"We are using this virtual press briefing today to launch a critical, national [CALL to ACTION](#)," stated **Bruce Lee Livingston, MPP**, Executive Director / CEO at [Alcohol Justice](#). "By simply **texting REGULATE to 313131**, people in any state can ask their Governor to hit the pause button on alcohol deregulation, re-examine their state's relationship with alcohol businesses, acknowledge that excessive alcohol use is No. 3 on the list of preventable causes of death, and promise that alcohol deregulation will not become the new normal by ending COVID-19 regulatory rollbacks for economic relief as soon as possible. **It's time to make public health essential, not public drinking.**"

For complete participant statements and important resource links, go to the [virtual press pack](#).



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