

Wisconsin: We don't need more access to alcohol

Source: Herald Times News

Nov. 5

In Wisconsin, where problems associated with the abuse of alcohol already soar above national levels, the last thing the Legislature should be considering is increasing the availability of alcohol.

This is exactly what AB 63, which was passed by the Assembly on Oct. 25 and the state Senate two days later, accomplishes. Rather than find solutions to problem and binge drinking, the Legislature has added fuel to the fire.

In Wisconsin, Class A alcohol licenses are issued to establishments such as gas stations and liquor stores for the retail sale of alcohol. Prior to this legislation, licensees were allowed to sell beer from 8 a.m. until midnight and liquor from 8 a.m. until 9 p.m. That allows 16 hours a day to sell alcohol; somehow our legislators don't believe this is enough.

When signed by the governor, the law will allow these locations to sell alcohol beginning at 6 a.m. This unneeded change does nothing but reinforce the Legislature's unwillingness to address problem drinking in Wisconsin.

Evidence based on the experience of other states and nations shows that increased access to alcohol perpetuates risky and problem drinking and related problems like increased OWIs, risky sexual behaviors and violence.

The Legislature has decided to go ahead with a plan to increase alcohol access anyway. It tells our youth the earlier in life you can begin consuming alcohol, the better. It displays our tolerance for allowing people to get access to alcohol at almost any time of day.

Wisconsin already is the top binge drinking state in the country, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Making alcohol more available reinforces our unhealthy attitude toward drinking and enables alcohol abuse and binge drinking. It is disturbing that a bill like this is acceptable to leaders in a state where alcohol consumption is third in the nation, and has caused almost 4,000 alcohol-related injuries in 2009 alone, with almost 250 alcohol-related deaths.

This bill can only worsen those numbers and prematurely end lives.

Increasing the availability of alcohol in our communities is not what this state needs. What we need are solutions to Wisconsin's alcohol abuse problems that create safer and healthier communities and neighborhoods.

Over the last seven years, Manitowoc County's Alliance for Substance Abuse Prevention coalition has continued to address underage drinking. The last three years the coalition has worked under a federal grant that encourages us to change the culture, which will then change behavior. For example, if adults model binge drinking as an acceptable behavior, our youth see it as an acceptable behavior for themselves.

If adults promote the need for alcohol to cope, have fun or to raise money, youth will also see the need for alcohol in their lives to accomplish the same things.

One of our students, after mapping all the places that alcohol is sold and all the places for alcohol advertising in our community, stated, "Alcohol in Wisconsin is like beaches in Florida. It is everywhere and it is just what we do."

Passage of AB 63 is just another example of the dependence our communities have on alcohol. It has been a continuous battle in this community and this state to ask adults to model and moderate appropriate alcohol consumption.

We have made great strides in Manitowoc County and have become well-known in the state for some of our efforts to combat the misuse of alcohol, including being the first county to pass a social host ordinance and implementing the Life of an Athlete program.

AB 63 does allow local communities to maintain sale of Class A licenses starting at 8 a.m. It is Manitowoc County's ASAP coalition's desire that our community will be a leader, once again, and support efforts to maintain the current serving hours for Class A licenses.

Annie Short is co-chair of the Manitowoc County Alliance for Substance Abuse Prevention.