



Testimony

of

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Before the

**New York State Senate Standing Committee on Alcoholism
and Drug Abuse**

On

High-Alcohol Flavored Malt Beverages

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Legislative Office Building

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Good afternoon Chairman Klein and members of the committee. I am Dr. Tom Farley, Commissioner of the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. I want to thank you for holding this hearing on a critical public health issue. Excessive alcohol consumption, particularly among underage drinkers, is a long-standing and growing problem, and I appreciate this opportunity to testify.

We estimate that alcohol causes 1,500 deaths a year in New York City, making it the third-leading cause of preventable death in New York City, behind smoking and health problems related to obesity. Many people know that excessive drinking causes liver disease, but people often are unaware how much alcohol fuels traffic accidents, injuries, violence, and suicides, or that alcohol has long-term consequences like raising blood pressure and causing cancer. The problem of dangerous alcohol drinking appears to be getting worse. Recent data show significant increases in alcohol-related emergency department visits in New York City for all age groups over the past several years. One in ten hospitalizations in New York City is alcohol-related. Recent binge drinking was reported by half of underage drinkers and by 42% of adult drinkers.

The New York City Health Department is taking several steps to address the problems of underage and excessive drinking. This past winter, we conducted a media campaign in the subway system highlighting the dangers of excessive drinking. We are also excited about the proposed expansion of a promising program we have been promoting in New York City. The program, called “Screening, brief intervention, referral, and treatment”, or SBIRT, in health care settings has proven effective for reducing risky or dangerous alcohol and drug use, and we hope to expand our own successful program for use into private physicians’ offices.

We do not think, however, that these programs will be sufficient to address this major health problem. We are particularly concerned about drinking by underage youth, and we believe we should do more to prevent our young people from drinking alcohol.

We are particularly concerned about underage drinking because, in addition to the immediate dangers created by excessive drinking, adolescent drinkers are especially vulnerable to developing longer-term problems with alcohol. In fact, drinking during adolescence can lead to a lifetime of alcohol problems. Two out of five adolescents who begin drinking before the age of 15 will become dependent on alcohol in their lifetimes. One in eight youth between the ages 18 and 20 years old are already alcohol dependent.

And while adolescent drinkers are at greater risk for these longer-term health problems, they are also at least as likely as adult drinkers to experience the immediate dangers of excessive drinking – assaults and violence, motor vehicle accidents, and other accidental, preventable causes of injury and death.

Young people are particularly drawn to drinking by certain types of alcoholic beverages. Flavored malt beverages are premixed alcoholic beverages that are sweet and carbonated, and they have been nicknamed “alcopops”. The alcohol content in these beverages ranges from 4% to as high as 14%, making the alcohol content in some of

these products considerably higher than the alcohol content in beer. Furthermore, although alcopops are initiated with malt fermentation, as a brew, the alcohol composition of the final product is not the same as beer. The initial malt brew is only a precursor in alcopops-making – it is subsequently filtered and sweetened flavoring is added, sometimes including distilled spirits. In the final product, the sugary flavor effectively masks the alcoholic taste. This makes it easy for children to transition from drinking soda to alcohol.

Surveys tell us that alcopops are more popular among adolescent drinkers. Adolescents are more likely than adults to drink alcopops – more than two-thirds of high school students report drinking alcopops in the past year, in comparison with only a quarter of adults. And among adolescent drinkers, girls and younger underage drinkers show the greatest preference for alcopops.

The way that alcopops are marketed often appears to target underage drinkers. These products are branded with catchy names, and packaged in bright colors and appealing designs. They look very similar to sports and soft drinks. Advertisements for alcopops often appear in youth-oriented media.

Referring to alcopops, one alcohol industry executive was quoted as saying, “The beauty of this category is that it brings in new drinkers, people who don’t really like the taste of beer.” Another executive called alcopops “the perfect ‘bridging beverage’ between carbonated fruit juices and the new hard lemonades.”

Unfortunately, these bridge beverages are readily available to the adolescents to for whom they are marketed. Alcopops are sold alongside beer, juice, and soda, in grocery and convenience stores. Children and adolescents already frequent these outlets for food, beverages, and household products, increasing their exposure to alcopops. In New York City, more than 20% of public high school students who drink report purchasing or otherwise obtaining their alcohol from retail stores, including delis, grocery stores, and mini-marts. And in areas with a high number of alcohol outlets, retail stores may be more likely to sell to underage drinkers.

Moreover, retail stores selling alcopops are vastly more common than liquor outlets in communities with the greatest health disparities in New York City. Because alcopops are more accessible to youth living in these high disparity areas, youth in these communities are at greater risk for earlier initiation to drinking and the development of alcohol dependence or abuse problems in adulthood.

Legislation

Senator Klein recently introduced legislation to designate alcopops with an alcohol content of 6% or higher as liquor. The legislation makes a great deal of sense. These products are not beer and should not be treated as beer. The legislation would restrict the sale of these drinks to liquor stores, where they can be sold alongside wine and liquor. It would take them out of the grocery stores and delis where underage

drinkers are more likely to purchase them. Passage of this bill would result in 19,000 fewer places – 8,700 in New York City – for kids to buy high-alcohol-content alcopops.

We want to thank and congratulate Senator Klein for introducing this bill, which we see as an important step in the right direction toward protecting our young people from the problems of excessive and underage drinking. However, some of the products that are most popular among underage drinkers have lower alcohol contents, often 5% or 4.5%. They still target children, and can be just as harmful as drinks with slightly more alcohol. Not including these beverages in the bill means preserving underage access to alcopops in thousands of grocery stores, delis, and convenience stores across the state. For this reason, we recommend that Senator Klein modify his bill to include all flavored malt beverages, rather than only those with alcohol contents above 6%. We expect that several public health and child welfare organizations would support a restriction on the sale of all alcopops to liquor stores. Some of these groups are here today.

Making all alcopops less accessible to children will save lives. The Marin Institute estimates that restricting adolescents' access to alcopops in New York State would result in 20,000 fewer incidents of harm annually, including accidents and assaults.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify, and for your leadership on reducing underage drinking. I would be glad to answer any questions.