



February 11, 2011

Dear Rep. Olson, Rep. Neuman and Members of the Committee:

Please accept this letter in opposition to HB 125. The Mat-Su Health Foundation is a 501c3 that owns a part of the Mat-Su Regional Medical Center. We use the revenues we earn from our local hospital to make grants to improve the health of Mat-Su residents.

One of the strategies the Foundation employs to improve health is to invest in local coalition work on health-related issues. In this regard, I currently chair the Mat-Su Substance Abuse Prevention Coalition (MSAPC), which is comprised of local behavioral health providers, law enforcement, media representatives, parents, youth-serving organizations, the Mat-Su Borough School District and others concerned about preventing and reducing youth substance abuse.

MSAPC believes that substance abuse needs to be addressed at the local level through environmental strategies. By environmental strategies, I mean concrete efforts to change the actual environment or culture of our community so that it supports healthy children, adults and families. Examples of environmental strategies include using media to inform and educate; enacting policies and laws to address access and other issues; proper enforcement of these laws and policies; and efforts to literally change social norms. Our coalition is committed to 1) data-driven efforts; 2) a coordinated community response; and 3) to being a statewide leader for coalition engagement on this issue.

The MSAPC has serious concerns about HB 125. We do not support moving the Alcoholic Beverage Control Board out of the Department of Public Safety to the Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development. More than any other drug, alcohol has the broadest and deepest impact and cost to Alaska—on its coffers, its systems, its communities and most importantly, its families and children. Whether you are talking about its contribution to motor vehicle accidents, crime, domestic violence, sexual assault or to absenteeism rates and workforce productivity of small or large businesses or to the volume of admissions it drives at our hospitals and doctor's offices, its impact is pervasive and extremely costly to Alaska and to Alaskans. Alcohol is also the documented gateway to other drug use.

Our coalition has documented through the 2008 Alaska Healthy Kids Survey (AHKS) that by the time Mat-Su students are in 11th grade, 68% of them have used alcohol. This is the highest use rate of any substance by Mat-Su youth. Thirty-eight percent have used alcohol in the last 30 days. Twenty-six percent have binged on alcohol in the last 30 days. According to the 2009 Youth Risk Behavior Survey data for Alaska, 77% of 12th graders across the state have used alcohol. Alcohol use has become a rite of passage for our children—it is becoming the way we usher them into adulthood. We have to change the model.

In the AHKS, the majority of Mat-Su youth report that alcohol is readily available to them in terms of access. We know that the most prevalent access to alcohol occurs in the home—of their family or friends, and MSAPC is designing some environmental strategies to address this. Still, according to the Century Council statistics, 7% of that access takes place at an establishment that does not check IDs. These businesses are a portal for access.

According to the ABC board website, 15% of establishment compliance checks failed. Those failures are access points for our Alaskan youth. We're thrilled with the 85% success of the majority of businesses, but even 15% failure is too high.

From what we can tell from the limited testimony given to LB&A, this bill was primarily brought forward to curtail enforcement. MSAPC is highly focused on preventing underage drinking, and the compliance checks that are currently in place are proven environmental strategies to reduce access, thereby decreasing the risk for youth consumption of alcohol. If the ABC board is moved to the department of Commerce, MSAPC is concerned that enforcement will be weakened. MSAPC advocates for increased enforcement, among other environmental strategies to combat alcohol access and use, and does not support any effort to weaken it.

MSAPC dovetails its work with The State Plan to Reduce & Prevent Underage Drinking. This plan was written with a great deal of public input—including 25 public forums across the state of Alaska over a two year period. The public has spoken clearly in this document that they would like to see increased and uniform enforcement. On page 11, the report calls for a specific strategy to “strengthen Alaska’s compliance check program in retail outlets, restaurants, and bars, using media campaigns and license revocation to increase compliance. The program should include regular notification and education of retailers and the public concerning the program and publicizing the outcome.” Because of the strong public voice within this adopted plan, MSAPC is committed to marshalling the energies of substance abuse prevention coalitions across the state of Alaska to endorse environmental strategies, to strengthen enforcement and to fight the passage of this bill.

Finally, a focus of this bill seems to be on the economic impact of the hospitality industry through alcohol sales. It seems that the committee is being asked to weigh the economics or the money that alcohol generates in the private sector over the health of Alaskans. The Mat-Su Health Foundation understands that a person’s economic status and education level are two of one’s largest determinants of health. That being said, there is one problem that cuts across our society in terms of education level and economic status—and that’s alcohol. One of the highest rates of growth in alcoholism and related diseases at this time is among the aging baby boomers. If you are going to weigh the money that alcohol sales generates in terms of its impact to the economy, then you need to weigh its cost to Alaska systems and the health, quality and productivity of its citizens. We are assured you will see the costs far outweigh the potential gains enjoyed by the industry.

Respectfully,



Elizabeth Ripley
Executive Director
Mat-Su Health Foundation