

# FAST FACTS

# Defending 21

## Minimum Legal Drinking Age

### The Problem

A coalition of 129 college presidents (3% of US colleges) is working to lower the Minimum Legal Drinking Age (MLDA) from 21 to 18, believing that the 21 drinking age is creating a culture of binge drinking on their campuses.<sup>1</sup> The coalition, known as the Amethyst Initiative and backed by the group Choose Responsibility, argues that the drinking laws have driven binge drinking underground and people 18 to 21 would drink more responsibly if it were legal for them to consume alcohol.<sup>2</sup>

New Jersey Senate President Richard J. Codey disagrees. He says, "This is nothing more than college presidents passing the buck instead of thinking of more constructive ways to crack down. Furthermore, it opens up the floodgates to allow alcohol into the hands of high school students who are 18."<sup>3</sup>

MADD, the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, the American Medical Association, National Transportation Safety Board, Governors Highway Safety Association and many others have called on the college presidents to work with the traffic safety, public health, and law enforcement communities to find a realistic solution to underage and binge drinking.<sup>4</sup>

### 21 MLDA History

In the 1970's, states had drinking ages from 18 to 21 which led to "blood borders"- teens driving across state lines to drink and then drive home, killing and injuring themselves and others. To prevent this, Congress passed the National Minimum Drinking Age Act of 1984 [23 U.S.C. § 158]. The law set 21 as the minimum age for purchasing and publicly possessing alcoholic beverages. They also gave it teeth - a state not enforcing the minimum age would lose ten percent of its annual federal highway apportionment.<sup>5</sup> New Mexico has had a 21 MLDA (with exceptions) since 1934.<sup>6</sup>

**As well as increasing fatalities and injuries, NM will lose \$37 million in federal highway funds in FY09 if it lowers the MLDA.<sup>7</sup>**

### Facts on Underage Drinking

- Excessive alcohol consumption contributes to more than 4,600 deaths among underage youth in the United States each year.<sup>8</sup>
- Underage drinking is strongly associated with health and social problems among youth including alcohol-impaired driving, physical fighting, poor school performance, and unsafe sexual activity.<sup>9</sup>
- 500,000 18 to 24-year-old college students suffer injuries each year related to drinking and about 1,700 die in such accidents.<sup>10</sup>
- More 18 year-olds die in low BAC (between .01 and .09 BAC) crashes than any other age.<sup>11</sup>

**"State Age-21 laws are one of the most effective public policies ever implemented in the Nation...I am chagrined to report that some supposedly responsible officials would like to repeal them."<sup>12</sup>**

**Jim Hall, Chairman National Transportation Safety Board**

### 21 MLDA Has:

- Proven to be one of the most effective impaired driving deterrents, resulting in nearly 25,000 lives saved since 1982.<sup>13</sup>
- Caused a 63% decline in alcohol-related crash fatalities among young drivers since 1982.<sup>14</sup>
- Decreased youth drinking: In 1983, 88% of high school seniors reported alcohol use in the past year and 41% reported binge drinking. By 1997, alcohol use by seniors had dropped to 75% and the percentage of binge drinkers had fallen to 31%.<sup>15</sup>
- Resulted in lower levels of alcohol consumption among young adults age 21 years and older as well as those less than age 21 years.<sup>16</sup>
- Lowered death rates for suicide and unintentional non-traffic injuries among persons under 21.<sup>17</sup>

# If you're old enough to fight for your country...

**"It offends me when people use a young person in uniform to push their cause. A grieving family or a soldier who lost an arm or leg is not the poster child for lowering the drinking age.**

**If you want to honor the troops let's focus on adequate pay and the best healthcare. Put a scholarship in their hand, not a beer.**

**The very last thing we need to do is give a beer to a young soldier as our expression of national gratitude."**

**Evan Hoapili, Colonel, USAF (ret)**

Col. Hoapili, former commander of the 90th Space Wing Division, took action against problem drinking involving base troops, many younger than age 21. His innovative approach at Warren AFB, Wyoming, produced such dramatic results that it is now a model for the US Air Force. To read his open letter on lowering the drinking age, see: [www.faceproject.org/resources/Hoapili.html](http://www.faceproject.org/resources/Hoapili.html).

It doesn't necessarily follow that you are also old enough to drink. Ages of initiation vary. One can vote at 18, drink at 21, rent a car at 25, and run for president at 35. These ages take into account the requirements, risks, and benefits of each act.

U.S. Code [10 U.S.C. § 2683] requires military installation commanders to adopt the same drinking age as the state in which the military base is located. If the base is located within 50 miles of Canada or Mexico, the commander may adopt a lower drinking age for military personnel on base. Although Fort Bliss, TX, could have an 18 MLDA, it raised its MLDA to 21 in May 2008. Citing increasing numbers of alcohol-related incidents, including alcohol poisonings, assaults and DWIs, Commander Major General Howard B. Bromberg said the change was necessary to ensure the safety of their soldiers, their families, and the community.<sup>18</sup> These steps were needed because more than half of all active duty military personnel report binge drinking in the past month, and young adult service members exposed to combat are at a significantly greater risk for binge drinking than older service members.<sup>19</sup>

## Recommendation - Keep the 21 MLDA

The 21 MLDA helps keep children healthy by postponing the onset of alcohol use. Deferred drinking reduces the risks of:

- Developing alcohol dependence or abuse later in life.<sup>20</sup>
- Harming the developing brain.<sup>21</sup>
- Suffering alcohol-related problems, such as trouble at work, with friends, family, and police.<sup>22</sup>

**Maintain the 21 MLDA** based on strong evidence of effectiveness, including a median 16% decline in motor vehicle crashes among underage youth in states that increased the legal drinking age to 21.<sup>23</sup>

### Additional Resources

**1. MADD 21 MLDA Website**

[www.why21.org/](http://www.why21.org/)

**2. Support 21 Community Toolkit**

[www.cadca.org](http://www.cadca.org)

**3. CDC 21 MLDA Fact Sheet**

[www.cdc.gov/alcohol/quickstats/mlda.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/alcohol/quickstats/mlda.htm)

**Sources:** 1. Amethyst Initiative, [www.amethystinitiative.org](http://www.amethystinitiative.org), acsd 09/11/08. 2. Choose Responsibility, [www.chooseresponsibility.org/](http://www.chooseresponsibility.org/), acsd 09/11/08. 3. Richard Codey pr, <http://www.njsendems.com/release.asp?rid=2428>, acsd 09/11/08. 4. MADD, <http://www.madd.org/Parents/UnderageDrinking.aspx>, acsd 09/11/08. 5. <http://epw.senate.gov/title23.pdf>, acsd 09/11/08. 6. NHTSA, <http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/injury/research/FewerYoungDrivers/appendix.htm>, acsd 09/11/08. 7. Julie A. Clements, J.D., M.P.P., MADD Director of State Legislative Affairs. 8. CDC, Alcohol Related Disease Impact, <http://apps.nccd.cdc.gov/ardi/Homepage.aspx>, acsd 09/11/08. 9. Miller, Naimi, Brewer, Jones. Binge drinking and associated health risk behaviors among high school students. *Pediatrics* 2006;119:76-85. 10. College Drinking Task Force report to NIH's NIAA, "A Call to Action: Changing the Culture of Drinking at US Colleges," *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 3/02. 11. NHTSA, [http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/injury/alcohol/Community%20Guides%20HTML/PDFs/Public\\_App7.pdf](http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/injury/alcohol/Community%20Guides%20HTML/PDFs/Public_App7.pdf), acsd 09/11/08. 12. Jim Hall, Chairman, National Transportation Safety Board, press conference on the National Drunk and Drugged Driving Prevention Month, Washington, DC, 12/18/97. 13. Statement of Vice Admiral Thomas J. Barrett, US Deputy Secretary of Transportation before the US Congressional Subcommittee on Transportation Safety, 10/25/07, <http://testimony.ost.dot.gov/test/pastest/07test/barrett2.htm>, acsd 09/11/08. 14. NHTSA, "1995 Youth Fatal Crash and Alcohol Facts," 2/97. 15. Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, "National Survey Results on Drug Use, Monitoring the Future Study: Volume 1, Secondary School Students," 1995 and 1997a. 16. O' Malley, Wagenaar, "Effects of minimum drinking age laws on alcohol use, related behaviors, and traffic crash involvement among American youth. *J. of Studies on Alcohol*. 1991; 52:478-491. 17. Jones, et al., "The Effect of Legal Drinking Age on Fatal Injuries of Adolescents and Young Adults," *American Journal of Public Health*, 82(1):112-115, 1992. 18. Fort Bliss Senior Commanders Bulletin, [https://www.bliss.army.mil/bliss\\_home\\_files/documents/bulletins/Drinking\\_Age\\_Policy.pdf](https://www.bliss.army.mil/bliss_home_files/documents/bulletins/Drinking_Age_Policy.pdf), acsd 09/11/08. 19. Jacobson IG, Ryan MAK, Hooper TI, Smith TC, et al. Alcohol use and alcohol-related problems before and after military combat deployment. *JAMA* 2008;300:663-675. 20. Grant, Dawson, "Age of Onset of Alcohol Use and Its Association with DSM-IV Alcohol Abuse and Dependence" *Journal of Substance Abuse*, 9:103-110, 1997. 21. Little, et al., "Differential Effects of Ethanol in Adolescent and Adult Rats," *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*, 20(8):1346-1351, 11/96. 22. Barnes, et al., "Alcohol Misuse Among College Students and Other Young Adults: Findings From a General Population Study of New York State," *The International J. of the Addictions*, 27(8):917-934, 1992. 23. Shults, Elder, Sleet, Nichols, Alao, Carande-Kulis, Zaza, Sosin, Thompson. Task Force on Community Preventive Services. Reviews of evidence regarding interventions to reduce alcohol-impaired driving. *Am J Prev Med* 2001;21(4S):66-88.

