

Holt: To-go alcohol will create challenges for Texas youth

NICOLE HOLT

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In a move that will have implications in communities across the state, Texas is moving forward with a policy to permanently allow to-go purchases of alcoholic beverages, creating new, unique challenges to ensuring the safety of Texas youth. It is imperative we more thoughtfully consider the risks and consequences of to-go alcohol sales and – more importantly – take action to limit those risks and protect kids.

Having passed the state legislature and now headed for the governor's signature, this measure is certainly well on its way to becoming law. Even through these final steps of the legislative process, the need for ensuring important protections for our youth remains as crucial as ever.

Youth alcohol use is linked to serious consequences including impaired driving crashes and fatalities, poor academic performance, increased dropout rates and sexual assault. Young people who drink are at higher risk for low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, addiction and suicide. And yet alcohol remains the most widely used substance by youth, and the easiest to get.

By creating expanded access to alcohol without having appropriate oversight and enforcement policies for these new purchase options, we're creating a scenario ripe for underage drinkers to take advantage of. It's our jobs as adults to do the work



necessary to protect our kids and make it harder – not easier – for them to access anything that can cause them harm. As the state moves forward with this proposal, they must do so thoughtfully, with steps taken to ensure youth are protected. Through the task force, they have an opportunity to create a model for other states to follow, to show leadership in structuring this policy in a responsible way.

The statewide task force we've proposed will directly address the risks and consequences of increased youth access. Charged with determining the full scope of the legislation's public health and safety impact, the task force will also determine effective, enforceable protocols for the safe sale of alcohol to-go. Alcohol is simply not the same as any other product and presents significant risks, especially to youth. Because of this, changing alcohol policies cannot be a business decision alone; the public health and safety implications can't be a sidenote, and targeted protections must be identified and put in place.

Public health experts with particular experience specific to alcohol policy must have a significant role in this task force. With expertise informed by science, data and methodologies, these professionals should be leveraged as a valuable resource in shaping this policy the right way. And to ensure full transparency, reporting on the task force's findings and proposals must be made publicly available.

As this policy continues to move toward becoming law, we must ensure the task force becomes a reality; that health experts are provided a strong platform from which they can help guide policy; and that the final task force has teeth, compelling the oversight and enforcement necessary for protecting Texas youth. With the bills now heading to the Governor's desk, we call on him to do right by our communities and our youth by voicing his support for the task force and taking action to make it happen.

Nicole Holt is chief executive officer of Texans for Safe and Drug-Free Youth, the state's leading organization working to end underage alcohol, tobacco and other drug use.