

## STATEMENT

### UNDER THE INFLUENCE:

## THE BINGE DRINKING EPIDEMIC ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES

### Governmental Affairs Committee

### Chairman Lieberman

May 15, 2002

Good morning and welcome to you all. Today, the Governmental Affairs Committee will be looking at a very serious public health problem.

Our message is a simple and serious one: alcohol abuse on college campuses has reached a point where it is far more destructive than most people realize and today threatens too many of our youth. College students need to know that if they party to excess, they could die. And college administrators need to know that intervention is the only way to get this out-of-control behavior under control.

I came to this concern from observing, listening, watching what was happening in my home state of Connecticut, where within the last 12 months, at least six college students have died in alcohol-related incidents. Eighty-five alcohol-related arrests were made during the University of Connecticut's Spring Weekend this year. And last week, Trinity College suspended one of its oldest fraternities. The number are alarming - especially given Connecticut's relatively small size - but I have come to realize it is not an anomaly, it is not unusual. Connecticut, sadly, is just a part of a nationwide trend among college students to get as drunk as possible as quickly as possible, often with devastating effects.

Now, I know people consider drinking another rite of passage for college students. I remember my own experience in college. But drinking is not the issue. What we are concerned about is drinking in excess, binge drinking, drinking oneself to death. This type of behavior is not a harmless initiation into adulthood. And it isn't a sport. It's toxic, wreckless conduct that can cut short young lives.

We are fortunate to have with us today the acting director of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, which has recently published a powerful new study illustrating the seriousness of heavy, episodic drinking on college campuses. The study found that while the proportion of non-drinking students has risen, so too have extreme forms of drinking. The upshot is that drinking by college students between the ages of 18 and 24 contributes to 1400 deaths a year, 70,000 cases of sexual assault or rape, and 500,000 injuries. Let me repeat those numbers because to me they're stunning. Each year, college drinking contributes to 1400 deaths, 70,000 and sexual assaults or rapes, and 500,000 injuries.

Additionally, the Surgeon General has identified binge drinking among college students as a major public health problem. About 40 percent of students apparently binge drink, according to one study - which is defined as five or more drinks in a row for men and four or more drinks for women - and

one recent survey found that 20 percent of students reported binge drinking more than three times over a two-week period.

Most binge drinkers are freshmen, most are men, and most attend schools where fraternities, sororities, or athletics dominate campus life. And, curiously, the National Institute also found that most binge drinking occurs in the Northeast.

Clearly the culture of high-risk drinking is a problem that touches not just a few students and their families, but entire communities. University of Notre Dame President Edward Malloy, who co-chairs the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism Task Force on College Drinking, said that even though “a minority of college students engage in high-risk drinking, all students, and their parents, faculty, and members of the surrounding community suffer the negative consequences of alcohol abuse, such as assault, vandalism, and traffic accidents.”

So our obvious question is: what’s being done about it? In my opinion not enough. Some colleges are actively working to revise alcohol policies, others are struggling with policy changes, but, from what I see, too many more are denying a problem even exists. The California State University system is a model of aggressive intervention. After the alcohol overdose of a freshman fraternity pledge, they adopted a comprehensive set of policies to reduce alcohol abuse among students, including educational programs, training, intervention, and treatment. The California State University system should be commended for understanding that to sit on the sidelines is to await the death of more students.

More colleges and universities should be implementing tougher alcohol policies and working with communities and local law enforcement to enforce minimum drinking age laws, to increase enforcement at campus events where excessive drinking is promoted, and to inform incoming students and their parents about alcohol policies and penalties.

I don’t know, as we begin this hearing, if there’s any appropriate legislative response. In the first instance, we’re holding this hearing to educate the committee and the public and to engender action and reaction from students, colleges, and administrators to save some lives. As the research shows, excessive alcohol consumption threatens the health and safety of all students and disturbs and threatens the lives of those in surrounding communities. We must redouble our efforts to bring college alcohol consumption under control, to provide students with the tools to make more informed decisions, and to save the lives of as many students as we possibly can.

Thank you.

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