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“NJ 21 Coalition” Formed to Support Current Legal Drinking Age of 21

Trenton – As college students return to campuses across the State, the NJ21 Coalition has announced its support of maintaining the current drinking age, citing evidence that drunk driving fatalities among young people have dramatically decreased in New Jersey since the minimum age was raised to 21 more than 25 years ago.

Organized by the Division of Highway Traffic Safety, the Division of Alcoholic Beverage Control and the Partnership for a Drug-Free New Jersey, NJ21 is comprised of State government, law enforcement and non-profit agencies opposed to lowering the drinking age. The coalition was created in response to the Amethyst Initiative, a recently developed effort that has received support from college and university presidents across the nation who believe the current minimum legal drinking age should be revised.

New Jersey Attorney General Anne Milgram echoed the sentiment of the NJ21 Coalition, and supports maintaining the current drinking age.

“Since the drinking age was raised to 21 in New Jersey in the 1980’s, we have seen nearly a 78 percent decrease in the number of young people ages 18 to 20 who have been killed in drunk driving crashes,” Attorney General Milgram said. “These numbers alone tell us without any doubt, the drinking age must be maintained. It’s been proven to save young lives, and nothing is more important.”

In 1980, when the drinking age was changed to 19, fatalities were at an all-time high for 18 to 20 year olds, with 88 young people losing their lives in drunk driving crashes. In 1983, when the drinking age was raised to 21, 45 individuals in that same age group died as a result of a drunk driving-related crash. Since that time, the numbers of fatalities related to DWI crashes has steadily decreased. In 2007, 10 young people were killed in drunk driving crashes on New Jersey roadways. That number has remained constant since 2005.

“These numbers clearly illustrate the positive impact the current drinking age has had on improving safety on New Jersey roadways,” stated Pam Fischer, Director of the Division of Highway Traffic Safety. “These numbers tell us that we have made progress -- significant progress -- and there’s no need to change what is clearly saving lives.”

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), the current minimum legal drinking age has reduced traffic fatalities involving drivers aged 18 to 20 years old by 13 percent, saving nearly 900 lives every year. Research has shown that the enactment of 21 as the minimum drinking age has been one of the most effective countermeasures ever put in place to reduce alcohol-related fatalities, and that such laws have saved more than 25,000 lives since 1975. All 50 states and the District of Columbia had enacted 21 as the minimum legal drinking age by 1988.

Division of Alcoholic Beverage Control Director Jerry Fischer noted that, “It is too easy to abdicate responsibility for addressing this significant problem when one sees it only in the context of his or her own limited borders. The college presidents who endorse lowering the drinking age need to look beyond the borders of their colleges and see how a community as a whole would be impacted.

“Lowering the drinking age to 18 would make alcohol more readily available to young people, not just on college campuses, but in the community at large, undermining efforts to keep minors from binge drinking, or drinking and driving, and the myriad other consequences of underage drinking, that harm not just our young people but those around them as well,” he continued. “It is with these tragic consequences in mind that the Division of Alcoholic Beverage Control wholeheartedly opposes lowering the legal drinking age below 21.”

Angelo M. Valente, Executive Director of the Partnership for a Drug-Free New Jersey added that, based on the 2005 Annual Review of the Public Health, more than 1,700 college students in the United States are killed each year, or nearly five every day, as a result of alcohol-related injuries.

“By lowering the drinking age from 21 to 18, we are extremely concerned that fatalities will increase and other alcohol-related situations, including binge drinking, date rape, and violent behavior will become more prevalent on our college campuses,” Valente said. “Approximately 50 percent of New Jersey high school seniors reach the age of 18 before high school graduation. By lowering the drinking age, we will certainly see additional serious issues arise, not only on college campuses, but at high schools throughout the State.”

"Like prescription medications, alcohol is already far too accessible and attainable, which means there is great potential for abuse and addiction," said Raquel Jeffers, the director of the Division of Addiction Services in the Department of Human Services. "Generally speaking,

young people are less likely to resist peer pressure, more likely to take risks and highly sensitive to the effects of alcohol. In fact, alcohol has the potential to impact the maturing brain and increase by four times susceptibility to addiction. Any change to the current drinking age will surely stress our already overwhelmed health care and substance recovery systems."

The NJ21 Coalition also applauds Rowan University for publicly stating their opposition to any changes to the minimum legal drinking age. University President Donald J. Farish reinforced that opposition in a letter to John McCardell, one of the founder's of the Amethyst Initiative.

The members of the NJ21 Coalition are: New Jersey Office of the Attorney General; New Jersey Division of Highway Traffic Safety; New Jersey Division of Alcoholic Beverage Control; New Jersey State Police; New Jersey Department Of Human Services, Division of Addiction Services; New Jersey Motor Vehicle Commission; Partnership for a Drug-Free New Jersey; MADD; New Jersey State Safety Council; New Jersey Police Traffic Officers' Association; Sheriffs' Association of New Jersey; New Jersey Prevention Network; Childhood Drinking (CD) Coalition; New Jersey State Association of Chiefs of Police; HERO Campaign; Rowan University; NJPTA; and the Governor's Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse.

The coalition is committed to reinforcing the lifesaving impact of the minimum 21 drinking age through enforcement, education and public awareness initiatives.

NOTE: Reporters may contact each of the above agencies directly for further comment on this issue.

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