

# Fighting Alcohol Abuse and Drunk Driving

Alcohol's mounting toll on Alaska and the public outcry against those who abuse alcohol and other substances led the Republican-led Majority to bills to fight underage drinking, limit how much Alaskans may legally drink before driving, clamp down on bootlegging, memorialize the victims drunken driving, and encourage rehabilitation for penitent offenders. The Majority's alcohol initiatives offer help to abusers who want to stop drinking— but swift, sure consequences to those who don't.



Most problem drinkers started young, and the Majority passed two bills that seek to nip alcohol abuse in the bud. House Bill 179 redirects state law to make sure courts can prosecute minors who consume alcohol, imposing escalating fines and community service requirements ranging from up to \$600 and 24 hours service for a first offense, to a maximum of \$1,000 in fines, 90 days in jail, suspension of the offender's drivers license and mandatory alcoholism treatment for a third offense.

Minors who enter bars, taverns or restaurants hoping to be illegally served not only endanger themselves, but also expose the owners of those licensed premises to significant fines or penalties, even if they refuse to serve the minors. Modeled on successful municipal laws, House Bill 214 balances the scales by allowing bar owners file small-claims lawsuits of up to \$1,000 against minors who attempt to illegally enter their establishments.

Bootlegging's corrosive influence in Alaska is well known, and the Majority took aim at the problem this year with House Bill 132, lowering the amount of alcohol a person may possess before law enforcement authorities may presume it is for illegal resale. It also authorizes the state Alcohol Beverage Control Board to have fingerprints of prospective liquor licensees through the FBI's national criminal history record system, to help keep retail alcohol sales in the hands of responsible, law abiding citizens.

Impaired drivers who end up in court, but who want to stop drinking, may take heart at the passage of House Bill 172, which establishes pilot "therapeutic courts" in Bethel and Anchorage. Up to 120 offenders a year who plead guilty may volunteer for an intensive program that includes medication to dull the craving for alcohol, intensive out-patient alcoholism treatment, and frequent monitoring by the courts and other authorities to ensure the offenders stay dry and follow a detailed treatment plan. Offenders who successfully complete the program can receive suspended or reduced sentences, or remain out of jail under electronic monitoring.

Drunken driving victimizes not only those killed or injured by impaired drivers, but also those left behind. The Majority passed House Bill 200 to designate July 3 as Drunk Driving Victims Remembrance Day in Alaska, to victims and survivors of impaired drivers and to serve as an occasion for all drivers to reflect on the consequences of getting behind the wheel after consuming alcohol. The Majority passed a resolution dedicating March 2001 as Sobriety Awareness Month, to promote the benefits of sobriety in the state.