

**Drinking Age Debate Ignores the Facts**  
**Submitted by Deanna Felts, Prevention Specialist, Seven Counties Services, Inc. Regional Prevention Center**

Recently, the issue of lowering the drinking age has received significant media attention. A group called Choose Responsibility has enlisted over 100 university and college presidents to sign on in support of a debate on the merits of the 21 year-old drinking age. For thousands of public health professionals, researchers and community and youth advocates, this announcement, dubbed the Amethyst Initiative, is troubling. Many of the arguments seem quite rational. *If one can fight for his country, why not be able to drink a beer? If we could make drinking alcohol less of a "rite of passage" maybe kids would drink less?* However, these arguments ignore the complex issues surrounding alcohol abuse and addiction.

Delaying the onset of first-use of alcohol is a critical public health strategy. Science confirms that the adolescent brain is not fully developed until the early to mid-20s. In fact, according to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, even a "single, moderate dose of alcohol can disrupt learning more powerfully in people in their early twenties, compared to those in their late twenties." The effects of repeated alcohol consumption during adolescence may also be long-lasting. Youth who begin drinking before the age of 15 are four times more likely to develop alcohol dependence as an adult than those who wait until age 21.

Without a doubt, underage drinking, particularly on college campuses is pervasive and has major repercussions. While lowering the drinking age will remove the immediate enforcement issue on college campuses and shift this responsibility to society at large, it will not alleviate the major costs and consequences associated with alcohol abuse. Despite the headlines, many university officials are not in support of lowering the drinking age. University of Miami President and former Secretary of Health and Human Services Administration, Donna Shalala, for one, refused and questioned the rationale, citing progress has been made and lowering the drinking age would only transfer the problem to our nation's high schools.

So, what has the 21 minimum drinking age accomplished? Fewer young people drinking. In fact, in 1984 when the drinking age was 18, only 8 percent of high school seniors had never used alcohol in their lifetime. Over time, that percent of seniors has risen to 28 percent, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse's 2007 Monitoring the Future survey.

Advocates in support of the 21 drinking age are not prohibitionists. However, it is too well known that alcohol abuse and addiction endangers lives, fractures families and damages communities. In an effort to strike a reasonable balance between our culture and these realities, community and public health advocates remain strongly in support of keeping the legal age at 21. Now is not the time to retreat. Encourage your local universities not to sign the Amethyst Initiative.

For more information or to find out ways to help reduce substance abuse among youth, please contact Spencer County CAN at 477-2577, visit [www.spencercountycan.com](http://www.spencercountycan.com) or the Regional Prevention Center of Seven Counties Services, Inc. at 502/589-8600.

This article was adapted from the Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America's Support 21 community toolkit.  
[http://www.cadca.org/coalitionresources/PP-Documents/support21/SAMPLE\\_OP\\_ED.doc](http://www.cadca.org/coalitionresources/PP-Documents/support21/SAMPLE_OP_ED.doc)