



## Written Testimony: Ready to Drink (RTD) Beverages

Submitted by: Jeff Hanley

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To: Members of the Senate Law and Justice Committee

The Commonwealth Prevention Alliance (CPA) is a nonprofit organization established to support prevention professionals in reducing substance use/misuse and risk related behaviors. CPA is very concerned about the discussion and introduction of bills making Ready to Drink (RTD) beverages permanently available outside of the Pennsylvania Wine and Spirit State Stores. These stores were established to handle spirit sales to protect the public, including young people, and to generate state revenues that are used to support communities across the state.

Young people have demonstrated a preference for sweet, flavored beverages like RTDs; and for this reason, CPA opposes efforts to expand the number of outlets to sell these products. By allowing RTDs to be sold outside the regular spirits-sales channel in the state, the product will become more accessible by permitting them to be sold in more locations, jeopardizing young people, and undermining our state's ability to capture these revenues for an identified growth product in the market. [According to the International Wines and Spirits Record \(IWSR\)](#), the RTD sector has grown 43% in global consumption in 2020 and is projected to continue this growth in future years, with the U.S. leading the way. The RTD sector is the only category that has seen growth this year, according to IWSR.<sup>1</sup> Why would our state want to take these revenues given the trajectory of this category?

RTDs are popular among youth and are associated with heavier consumption, particularly among young females.<sup>2</sup> In PA, the Single County Authorities (SCA) recently conducted a needs assessment to summarize the substance use problems and risk/protective factors most prioritized by counties. The outcomes revealed alcohol as the number one substance issue for youth and adults:

- The substances being used by youth most commonly prioritized by SCAs were alcohol, vaping and marijuana. Youth alcohol use was identified as priority for 60 counties, vaping for 48 counties and marijuana for 31 counties.
- Alcohol and opioids were the two most frequently prioritized substances being used by adults. Adult alcohol use (high risk drinking, binge drinking, DUI) was identified as a priority for 38 counties and opioid misuse for 35 counties.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theiwsr.com/beverage-alcohol-in-2020-performs-better-than-expected/>

<sup>2</sup> Huckle T, Sweetsur P, Moyes S, Casswell S. Ready to drinks are associated with heavier drinking patterns among young females. *Drug Alcohol Rev.* 2008 Jul;27(4):398-403. doi: 10.1080/09595230802093802. PMID: 18584390.

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While the state prioritizes policies to mitigate harms caused by opioids, we do not see that same level of prioritization with alcohol, despite it being the drug of choice among youth in the state and a leading cause of death and injury, according to the CDC.

Instead, we see proposals to expand access and availability that will only increase alcohol related harms. The efforts to weaken and remove alcohol policy safeguards across the commonwealth are troubling because many of these policies that regulate the availability and access of alcohol, are based on years of practice and scientific evidence to reduce excessive alcohol consumption (binge, heavy, underage drinking, etc.), alcohol-related injuries, hospitalizations, and mortality. Unfortunately, many policies are being weakened or eliminated in response to the economic challenges that have accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, due to the timing of these proposals during a global pandemic, specific research isn't available for community members and policymakers to address the issue from a broader lens of alcohol accessibility and availability.

As substance misuse prevention experts, we ask you to approach alcohol policy changes with the intent to protect all Pennsylvanians. We have an effective sales system in Pennsylvania to sell and serve spirits-based drinks through the PLCB stores that balances consumers' needs and prevents access to minors. We ask for support of this system that was designed to offer a level of protection from these products.

CPA has direct connection with prevention specialists and we provide them with resources and training to assist in their efforts to improve the public health of your communities. We believe this proposal will undermine the prevention workforce in three ways:

- Increasing the number of outlets that sell canned cocktails would have an adverse impact on current prevention initiatives and require a refocusing of environmental and policy strategies at the local level.
- Currently prevention professionals are in the midst of the opioid overdose epidemic, the increased acceptance and youth willingness to try marijuana, vaping, and mental health issues surrounding youth and adults.
- Increasing outlets that sell spirits will add a financial and workforce strain on prevention organizations and coalitions.

***In future hearings around substance use and misuse issues, the Commonwealth Prevention Alliance would be honored to provide testimony representing prevention professionals and their efforts to improve the public health of all Pennsylvania communities.***

Respectfully Submitted by:

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Jeffrey Hanley'.

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## ***Supplemental Materials for Consideration on Alcohol Policy Safeguards in Pennsylvania***

As states and localities have loosened alcohol policies in response to COVID-19 restrictions, concerns around a lack of enforcement capacity to monitor these kinds of sales and the real potential for increased drinking and driving behavior grows. Some of the policy safeguards on RTD beverages include limitations placed on where, when, and how the products are sold. **To protect public health and safety, once the initial business-related restrictions resolve, it is critical that such policies not be allowed to become permanent.**

These new initiatives to expand availability of alcohol have often been enacted without regard for public health and safety considerations that are the basis of those regulatory protections.

- The misuse of alcohol is linked to a large number of harms including motor vehicle crashes, cancer, suicide, unintended pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections and other negative outcomes (<https://www.cdc.gov/alcoholportal/index.html>).
- Excessive alcohol consumption is the third leading cause of preventable death in the United States accounting for 95,000 deaths per year (<https://www.cdc.gov/alcohol/fact-sheets/alcohol-use.htm>)
- To make matters worse, the pandemic arrived on the heels of two decades of steady increases in alcohol consumption across the population (increases across racial/ethnic groups, women, and older residents), a doubling of alcohol-related mortality, and a significant rise (62%) in alcohol-related emergency room visits, according to the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. (<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/acer.14239>)
- Reports from alcohol sales and government sources suggest that several months of lockdown, social isolation, and COVID-19 related fears have exacerbated alcohol problems.

As states begin to reopen, we urge states and local governments to strengthen the following alcohol policies to save lives and reduce alcohol-related harms:

- ***Reduce alcohol availability*** – As the concentration of alcohol retail outlets in an area increases--and they do so disproportionately in poor neighborhoods--alcohol consumption and related harms, such as injury, crime, and violence increase significantly. (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK76640>)
- ***While increasing access to spirits can make shopping more convenient, research shows that risks of increasing availability are much more serious and costly than this small added benefit.*** There are significantly more community harms attributed to spirits than any other category of alcohol; measured by factors such as drunk driving fatalities, excessive alcohol use, violent crime, and deaths caused by acute and chronic alcohol use.
- High alcohol outlet density is known to be an environmental risk factor for excessive drinking. To prevent excessive drinking, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends limiting alcohol outlet density through the use of regulatory authority (e.g., licensing and zoning), which is based on strong scientific evidence of effectiveness.

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- A review of 88 studies on alcohol outlet density and public health concluded that greater outlet density was associated with a variety of public health and safety concerns, including increased alcohol consumption, alcohol-impaired driving, injury, crime, violence, neighborhood disruption, and other harms (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19944925>).

***Preventing youth from accessing and using is the responsibility of everyone in our communities***, from prevention providers, school districts, parents, faith-based groups, employers, and policy makers. Data has proven that increasing access and availability will increase the use of spirits. And, the underage youth of PA are accessing alcohol.

***Community Guide on Preventing Excessive Alcohol Consumption.***

A non-federal, independent panel of public health and prevention experts after its systematic review of 39 peer-reviewed journal articles recommended the use of regulatory authority (e.g., through licensing and zoning) to limit alcohol outlet density as a strategy to reduce excessive alcohol consumption and related harms. The systematic review included 39 studies. Results from different types of studies consistently showed that alcoholic beverage outlet density and policy changes that affect ***alcohol outlet density were associated with excessive alcohol consumption and related harms*** (<https://www.thecommunityguide.org/findings/alcohol-excessive-consumption-regulation-alcohol-outlet-density>).

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