

## **For Immediate Release**

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Contact: Nancy Zahler or Sara Hess, Community Coalition for Healthy Youth,  
c/o Tompkins County Youth Services Department, 274-5310

### **Local leaders say research lacking for lowering drinking age**

While over 100 college and university presidents have been in the news recently encouraging a national debate on lowering the age for purchasing alcohol from 21 to 18, local leaders in Tompkins County are thankful that the presidents of Cornell University, Ithaca College and TC3 will not be signing on to their petition.

Nancy Zahler, Coordinator for the Community Coalition for Healthy Youth, is shocked that some educational leaders are ignoring years of research which shows youth are safer with a legal drinking age of 21. "I don't understand how they can ignore the scientific evidence," Zahler said. "There is no doubt that a change in policy would reduce safety for our young people.

"The university presidents have an important wish to reduce binge drinking, but they should know that the rate of drinking in 1984 (when legal drinking age was 18) was far higher amongst 12<sup>th</sup> graders than it is today (41% in 1984, compared to 26%.) Research shows many different health and safety problems result directly from teen drinking."

"We have every reason to think that all of these problems would increase, not decrease, by allowing legal drinking at an earlier age," claims Amanda Verba, Director of TST BOCES Youth Development and Chair of the Community Coalition for Healthy Youth.

Stacy Cangelosi, Prevention/Education Director at the Alcohol & Drug Council, pointed to research on fatalities, "Beer and other alcoholic beverages are implicated in the top three causes of teen deaths: accidents like car crashes, falls and drowning; homicides; and suicides. This is true today, even with the legal age at 21, but by raising the age since the 1970s, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that over 24,300 lives (all ages) have been saved. A recent study isolated the effect of raising the drinking age from other factors, such as safer cars and better roads and found that raising the drinking age *alone* led to an 11% drop in traffic deaths among youth from 1988 to 1995."

Another reason professionals in the field of prevention and treatment of alcohol abuse support the legal age of 21 is that early alcohol use dramatically increases the likelihood of adult alcoholism. Adolescent bodies, especially brains, are more vulnerable than those of adults. Their brains are more sponge-like, designed for maximum learning capacity, and are much more affected by alcohol. Teens that begin drinking before age 15 are 4 times more likely to develop alcohol dependence at some point in their lives than those who do not drink before age 21. (The study controlled for family history of alcohol.)

Other serious health risks increase with drinking. Teens that drink are 7 times more likely to engage in sex and to have more sexual partners than those who do not drink. Such behavior can lead to unprotected sex, risk of HIV and other diseases. Educators should be concerned about the fact that alcohol interferes with learning and memory. A study at Duke University showed that students who binge drank every weekend of their freshman year scored 10% lower on IQ tests than they scored the prior year. Other studies reveal that even a small amount of alcohol lowers the learning ability of young people when the same amount has no effect on adults.

European countries are held up as examples of where more liberal drinking age laws and attitudes foster more responsible styles of drinking by young people. A 2005 study that compared overall drinking, binge drinking, and intoxication rates in 34 European countries with those of US teens, found that “there is no evidence that the more liberal policies and drinking socialization practices in Europe are associated with lower levels of intoxication.” In fact, every European country except Turkey has even greater problems with heavy drinking by youth than we do. ([www.udetc.org/documents/comparedrinkrate.pdf](http://www.udetc.org/documents/comparedrinkrate.pdf))

The Community Coalition for Healthy Youth applauds the desire of colleges and universities to reduce problem drinking on their campuses. There are many research-based ways to prevent underage drinking including drug/alcohol prevention curriculum in schools; working with parents; early identification and treatment for alcohol or drug abuse; social norms campaigns that battle the misperceptions about underage drinking; regulation on the alcohol industry’s marketing to young people, and effective enforcement. All these approaches are far wiser than changing the minimum age limit.

With a society dedicated to creating a healthy and safe environment for its youth, underage drinking and binge drinking can be reduced by community-wide, comprehensive prevention efforts. So, when the Amethyst Initiative asks legislators to invite new ideas about the best ways to prepare young adults to make responsible decisions about alcohol, let’s start with the facts and with the knowledge that prevention, early intervention, and treatment can work.