

**Costs of Alcohol Overconsumption in Wisconsin
and Dane County are Sobering**

by Dane County Executive Kathleen M. Falk

It's a beautiful fall Saturday. You know Camp Randall is going to be rocking. Michigan is coming to town. You say goodbye to the kids and head out to meet your buddies at your favorite college hang-out downtown. Kick-off isn't for several hours so you have plenty of time to knock back some beer.

By kick-off you've got a good buzz and everyone gets a good laugh when you miss the curb leaving the bar headed for the stadium.

I'll stop there. How many people in this room have a concern or a problem with the behavior I've described?

Some of you are thinking...oh great here we go...another do-gooder preaching. Come on Falk....lighten up....have some fun. And let the rest of us have some fun, too.

Please hear me out for a few minutes here today.

I want to share with you some startling statistics that tell a disturbing story about how and how much we drink in Wisconsin.

I want to paint a picture of the human and societal costs of that drinking.

And I want to respectfully suggest that all of us need to think twice and maybe reconsider how we feel about situations like the one I just described.

Why? Because the fact that many people in our state accept – and laugh about – that situation is symptomatic of a larger, cultural norm here in Wisconsin...a norm that not only tolerates but encourages excess alcohol consumption...consumption that is dangerous, deadly, destructive and costly. And I think we can **only** make lasting inroads in reducing the human misery associated with alcohol abuse if we change that culture.

(Turn on cartoon on overhead screen)

That Wisconsin State Journal cartoon says a lot.

You know, there really is no easy way to begin this conversation...but it's a conversation we need to start...and we need as many people as possible to be a part of it.

What you see in this cartoon...is this really the way we want to be thought of?

Let's look at some cold, hard facts about drinking in Dane County and Wisconsin.

It's tough to pick up the newspaper or turn on the news and not see stories about people arrested for their third, fourth, fifth, sixth, even their 13th drunk driving offense.

Over just a few days recently, Dane County deputies arrested a Stoughton man on a Friday night for his sixth OWI and a Madison man the next night for his fifth OWI. Two days later a squad car was rear-ended by a drunk driver. The very next night...deputies picked up a man in Windsor for his fifth drunk driving offense.

Keep in mind: these are stories from a five-day stretch...and this is just what made the papers.

A Capital Times headline earlier this year this year was a real head-turner: “Man Convicted for 13th OWI.”

So while we might become accustomed to reading these stories and we might even begin to think these kinds of incidents are typical, I want to assure you: Wisconsin is not typical in this regard. We are not normal.

Wisconsin has the absolute worst rate of binge and chronic heavy drinkers in the nation. We have the worst rate of underage drinking in the country. Nearly 50-percent of our high school students drink...that’s more than any other state.

Wisconsin has one and a half times the national rate of arrests for operating a vehicle while intoxicated. For every one arrest _____.

It should not be a surprise then that Wisconsin has the highest percentage of fatal auto crashes involving alcohol in the nation...no State is worse than we are. 92% of drivers in fatal crashes are first time OWIs.

In 2006, there were 8,400 crashes caused by alcohol in Wisconsin. More than 300 people were killed and 5,600 others were hurt in those wrecks.

So in just one year, nearly 6,000 people – each with family, friends, and co-workers – were hurt or lost their lives all because someone got behind the wheel after drinking.

Here in Dane County, about 3,000 people are booked on drunken driving charges a year. Deputies respond to around 800 car crashes each year where alcohol is a factor. More than 40% of the fatal car crashes last year involved alcohol. But get this: three to four times as many people die in alcohol-related traffic crashes...than are murdered in Dane County each year. A drunk driver is a lethal weapon.

Now, I think most of us believe that Dane County and Wisconsin are great places to live. I certainly do. We have a high quality of life. Good jobs. Good schools. 60 great communities. Beautiful farms and lakes and natural resources.

With all we have going for us, why do we accept the carnage due to too much alcohol? Is it because we think we can't change it? Because we think it's always going to be this way? Because it is someone else's responsibility to deal with this problem? Because that's "just how things are"?

Alcohol makes us less safe not only on the roads but in other ways as well. For example, at the time of a sexual assault, nearly 40% of offenders and almost two-thirds of victims are under the influence. Alcohol is a factor in 30-percent of the physical assaults in our state.

The health risks are startling. Alcohol abuse leads to higher risks of heart disease, stroke, certain cancers, cirrhosis of the liver and pancreatitis. Alcohol is the 3rd leading cause of preventable death.

In 2005 alone, nearly 17,000 Wisconsinites were so impaired by alcohol or drugs they needed to be hospitalized.

Alcohol abuse knows no age, gender, or socio-economic barrier. Men and women, young and old, rich and poor are all affected.

In fact, alcohol harms women even greater than men. We process less in the stomach. They are more prone to liver disease and hear and _____ damage and with women alcoholism is up and twice as likely to die from alcohol related causes. Despite this, Wisconsin women lead the nation in binge drinking. More Wisconsin women ages 19-44, prime child-bearing age...drink here than anywhere else in the country. One in three women of this age group report having alcohol to drink

during their pregnancy. This increases dangerous risk factors....jeopardizes the well being of the baby....and increases the risk of low birth-weight and other developmental problems. “Fetal Alcohol Syndrome” is the most preventable cause of birth defects.

Twenty-five percent of children in this country – one of every four children – are exposed to alcohol abuse in the family. This means in Dane County nearly 25,000 kids under the age of 18 may go home to dads or moms who could be anything from passed out on the couch to verbally abusive or physically dangerous. And our behavior teaches our kids: 90 – 95% of adults with AODA problems started as adolescents. 80% of kids in the foster care system are from alcohol-abusing families. 2/3 of adults in treatment were abused or neglected as kids. Worse yet, about half of the children of alcoholics became alcoholics themselves. Kids who started drinking before age 15 are four times more likely to have alcohol problems as adults.

Our young people are also putting themselves at tremendous risk due to their drinking, which is often excessive, binge-type behavior that

is frighteningly dangerous to themselves and others. Almost half of our young people who are killed by a drunk driver were not themselves drunk.

A youth assessment taken in 2005 showed a third of all Dane County high school students¹ reported they had been binge drinking at least one time in the past month; 12% of high school freshman reported they used beer or wine one to three times in the past month. The highest abuse of alcohol is by 18 – 24 year olds.²

UW-Madison police issued more than one-thousand underage drinking tickets to UW students in 2006. Campus police report finding students unresponsive in their own beds and in bathroom stalls...lying in their own vomit. Students have fallen out of bed, off their bikes, down flights of stairs...and worse... while drunk.

Finally, let's just consider briefly the economic price we pay for alcohol abuse. The cost of lost productivity is \$1.34 billion per year. Underage drinking is estimated by _____ to cost Wisconsin \$1.16 billion per year. Alcohol related auto crashes alone cost us about \$500 million a year in our state.

¹ Consistent with statewide percentages

² See Impact of Alcohol and Illicit Drug Use in Wisconsin at p. 5

In Dane County, we spend about \$60-million in tax dollars each year to run our jail. Nearly half of the sentenced inmates in the jail...are there for alcohol-related offenses. Many others behind bars for domestic violence or assault or battery were under the influence of too much alcohol. Many inmates are repeat offenders who cycle in and out of the criminal justice system because alcohol continues to drive their behavior.

It makes sense then, that as we see the same people with drug and alcohol dependencies come back to jail again and again, we focus resources on treatment programs to break that cycle. Here in Dane County, we spend nearly eight million each year on such programs. That's a major commitment. And we've had results...for example, our Pathfinders program that provides treatment to offenders works.

But as I review the statistics I've shared with you today, I'm struck by this thought: Treating the consequences of alcohol abuse and treating those who suffer from it is important work that we should do as efficiently and humanely as we can....but can't we do more to **prevent** this to begin with?

Part of the reason you hired me as your county executive – and I’m honored to say you’ve kept renewing my contract for 11 years now – was that you want someone who likes solving problems and this is what I love doing. By bringing people together to find solutions ,we’ve done much.

There are lots of people doing lots of work on this issue across the county, including many people in this room. Together, we’re helping some people and making a dent in the problem....but clearly these statistics I highlighted earlier suggest there is much more to be done.

That’s why I’m determined to spend this spring and summer trying to figure out what else we can do, smarter or better, than what we are doing now.

This is NOT about putting a stop to Friday night fish fries. It isn’t about that glass of wine you have with dinner. It isn’t about grabbing a beer after work with your buddies.

It isn’t about stopping drinking to celebrate. It’s about stopping the celebration of drinking.

It is about exploring this mindset that we somehow should be proud of, or amused by, or find “normal” those who drink just to get drunk. It’s about changing the perceptions you saw in the cartoon I showed you earlier. It’s about keeping kids safe, people alive, families together and improving our public safety and health.

It’s about doing more for our young people who right now grow up in a culture of thinking the only things to do on Thursday, Friday, or Saturday night involve a bottle-opener, a screw cap or a keg.

It’s about changing a cultural mindset where drinking alcohol to excess is seen as a “rite of passage.”

It’s about changing adult behavior so our children and grandchildren grow up seeing us acting differently than we do now.

I know we are taking on a sacred cow in this state. I know there are many powerful interests that profit from the way things are right now. I’m willing to take that on. And I think there are corporate citizens who will be eager to help. But quite frankly the biggest obstacle is ourselves – thinking our drinking culture is normal. I need your help.

Now, I'm not naive about the magnitude of this problem: I grew up in a household where my father was an alcoholic. Everyone here likely knows a co-worker, a good friend, or a loved one who suffers from the misuse of alcohol and you know, like I do, how intractable a problem it can seem to be.

Maybe it is precisely *because* the problem seems so big and the struggle so difficult that we don't do more to tackle it.

It may be that we feel hopeless and think we can't change it. But I think we can.

I'm doing my homework: studying, reading, listening, and reviewing the options for how we can best move forward . I'll produce a set of steps I think we need to take. This is how I've worked to help solve other big problems, whether its policy for preventing sprawl, cleaning up our lakes or helping moms and dads in our poorest neighborhoods find jobs. I'll do the research, do the homework and most importantly, listen; it's a model that has served us well in the past.

I've also assembled a smart team, lead by Carol Lobes and Judy Adrian, to help. But I need your help. Now.

We all need to look inside ourselves and think twice about what we're willing to accept as appropriate. Whether it's looking in the mirror or talking with a co-worker, friend, or family member...we all can be part of the solution.

Our community can be different.

Let's start with agreeing we can change a culture - ours - that accepts alcohol abuse. This isn't something that any one person or any one law can change. There is no silver bullet. This isn't something that will happen overnight but we need to start somewhere. We have done other hard things.

Think back 20 years. Remember how widely accepted, how much of a cultural norm smoking was? How about recycling? You couldn't have convinced me 20 years ago that one day it would just be a way of life for people to recycle...and even have their own carts to do it.

These new norms have been achieved without huge government mandates.

They've happened because people worked together, educated one another, and were open to change. The end result...is progress.

Despite what the cartoonists poke fun at...we aren't born in this state with the innate know-how to drink. Behaviors....both good and bad....are influenced by what we see going on around us. Drinking is a learned behavior.

My wise Irish mother may have said it best. I remember calling her many years ago when my son was much younger to ask her advice on what I could do to get him to listen to me. As moms and dads...we've all been there.

I'll never forget what she told me. It's not what you say that teaches your children. It's how you get up every day and live your life.

We learn from each other's behavior. We set the expectations for one another.

What do you say....should we start today?
