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Bill aims at teen drinking

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CAPITOL MEDIA SERVICES

PHOENIX - A Scottsdale lawmaker thinks she's found a way to keep adults from giving booze to teens: Make 'em walk.

State Rep. Michele Reagan, R-Scottsdale, wants to require the Department of Transportation to suspend the driver's license of anyone who knowingly gives alcoholic beverages to someone under 21. A first offense would result in the automatic loss of license for six months; subsequent violations would mean one year of not being allowed to drive.

"Studies have shown that it's a friend or a co-worker or a family member over 21 years of age that is the primary reason that minors are obtaining alcohol," Reagan said.

She acknowledged it already is a crime for an adult to provide beer, wine or liquor to someone not of the legal drinking age. But Reagan said people ignore that law because the penalties are rarely imposed.

"No judge in their right mind is going to send someone to jail for six months - that's at taxpayer expense - six months for buying an underage child alcohol," she said. Reagan said her approach is more cost-effective.

"And I will say that most people fear losing their driving privileges more than going to jail," she added.

Reagan's legislation would simply add the loss of license to the existing misdemeanor penalties. But that still requires a conviction - which first requires an arrest.

Leesa Berens Morrison, director of the Department of Liquor Licenses and Control, said some police departments do cite adults, mainly in situations where they find that a parent has furnished alcohol for a youngster's party. "But it's difficult to find out where those parties are," she said.

She also said her agency's own enforcement operations are pretty much limited to checking whether retailers examine the identification of someone who might not be of legal drinking age, not to checking on individuals who are giving alcohol to children or their younger friends.

The legislation was endorsed by Jessica Smith, representing Students Against Destructive Decisions. She said Arizona is above the national average in underage drinking.

Smith said a large number of youths get their alcohol "right from their own home, their parents' refrigerators, or right from parents themselves."

But Reagan's legislation would not penalize parents who give a drink to their own youths in their own homes. And an adult who did not know his or her child was raiding the liquor cabinet also would not be at risk for losing a license. The bill also exempts liquor given to a minor as part of a religious ceremony.

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