

Wine bill will combat scourge of teen drinking

Direct shipment makes underage access very easy

Several years ago, a 17-year-old minor in Ingham County went online and bought alcohol. Shortly after she placed the order, the product was shipped directly to her dorm room. No card checks. No questions asked.

While the scenario I describe above was actually a sting using a decoy, fully supervised by law enforcement officials to crack down on illegal online alcohol sales, too many minors across the nation are getting their hands on alcohol because the Internet is making untraceable, unaccountable and unregulated alcohol purchases too easy.

Law enforcement agencies like my department, working with educators, parents and businesses across Mid-Michigan and the state, are on the front lines of the fight against illegal underage drinking. In the past 25 years, we've made some progress.

But let's be clear: The fight is far from over.

That's why a recent development that could open the floodgates to direct Internet alcohol sales in Michigan is so troubling.

A federal judge recently ruled that out-of-state cyber liquor retailers can sell alcohol directly to online customers.

As our sting operation revealed, online alcohol sales are dangerous because there is no way to see who is on the other end of the order. It could be a minor with a parent's credit card trying to buy liquor he or she otherwise wouldn't have access to, thanks to Michigan's tough alcohol distribution laws, which require face-to-face visual ID checks and accountability at every step.

We are not being alarmists or crying wolf.

Children buying alcohol online is a real problem, according to a landmark 2006 survey by Teenage Research Unlimited. In its survey of 14- to 20-year-olds, TRU found that:

▶ 3.1 million minors say they know of another minor friend who has ordered alcohol online.

▶ More than a half-million admitted they have bought alcohol online.

▶ 75 percent say their parents cannot control what they do on the Internet.

Alcohol is alcohol, and we must do everything in our power to ensure underage minors do not have easy access to alcohol.

Michigan's licensed alcohol distribution system is in place for important reasons.

From a law enforcement standpoint, Michigan's time-tested alcohol regulations are extremely important because they promote public safety. They help keep alcohol out of minors' hands. They help law enforcement track alcohol products. They keep

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dangerous liquor that may not be licensed for sale in Michigan out of consumers' hands.

The state Liquor Control Commission works in partnership with local law enforcement in the licensing of alcohol retailers, and ensures compliance with our laws.

Allowing retailers to sell alcohol online undermines these safeguards and puts

children at risk. There is no way for law enforcement to realistically police the more than half-million cyber liquor stores that could potentially flood Michigan with untraceable alcohol products.

Alcohol regulation is crucial to protecting consumers and families.

As a law enforcement official who has been on the frontline of the fight against underage drinking, I believe we must close the loophole that lets minors illegally buy alcohol online.