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PARENTS CALL FOR TAX HIKE ON ALCOHOL

\$10M proceeds would expand treatment for addicts in N.J.

Posted by the Asbury Park Press on 02/23/06

BY JONATHAN TAMARI
GANNETT STATE BUREAU

TRENTON — Kass Foster believes the right kind of help could have saved her son, but she said there wasn't enough room for him in New Jersey's drug treatment centers as he fought an addiction to heroin.

Hoping to increase treatment options, Foster and a group of mothers whose children have faced drug and alcohol addiction announced a statewide campaign Wednesday to raise money for treatment and win passage in the Legislature for an increase in taxes on wine, liquor and beer to provide lasting funding.

The idea received a lukewarm reception in several Shore area businesses selling alcoholic beverages, with owners voicing skepticism that the higher taxes would actually go for the intended purpose.

The group, Parent to Parent, plans to collect nickels in glass jugs while at the same time trying to build a grass-roots campaign for a 5-cent tax increase on every gallon of alcohol sold.

"This tiny coin is going to save lives. And maybe if (lawmakers) had taken the initiative awhile ago, my friends' sons would still be here," said Kathleen Dobbs, one of the group's founding members.

"Christian wanted to live, but Christian died while waiting in line" for drug treatment, said Foster, who lives in National Park, a town in Gloucester County.

Drug and alcohol awareness groups have pushed for an alcohol-tax increase for years, but they still have no lawmakers willing to back the idea.

Even if a bill is proposed, it would almost certainly face some opposition from bar and liquor store owners.

Nick Pagano, bar manager at The Office Restaurant and Lounge in Toms River, said "We would always back anything that goes toward recovery."

But he'd also want a guarantee that the tax would actually fund what it's supposed to.

Glenn McCarthy, general manager of Klee's Bar and Grill in Seaside Heights, said a small tax that actually does fund dependency recovery programs is not a bad thing.



(ST) Jim Patel, owner of the Lucky Spi is leery of raising taxes on alcohol

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"If you put a penny or two on a beer, no one is going to care," he said. "But you add another nickel or dime and (the revenue) doesn't go where it's supposed to, then who are we kidding?"

"Alcohol sells," Jimmy Patel, owner of Lucky Spirits liquor store in South Toms River, said, "in good times or in bad times."

But tax it enough and business owners could start to feel the effects, he said.

\$10M a year forecast

The 5-cent tax hike would raise \$10 million a year, Dobbs said, almost doubling the \$11 million the state currently spends on abuse education, treatment and prevention.

Without action by lawmakers, members of Parent to Parent plan to collect donations at stores and treatment centers statewide and have called on others to get involved through giving money or helping collect.

Every 3,800 nickels — or \$190 — buys one day of inpatient drug treatment, according to the group.

Currently, beer is taxed at 12 cents per gallon, wine at 70 cents and liquor at \$4.40. Those taxes have not been changed since 1992, according to the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence-New Jersey.

Berkeley resident John Shaller, enjoying a beer at Jimmy C's in downtown Toms River Tuesday, said he wouldn't mind paying a few more cents for his drink, "as long as it goes to a good cause."

Staff writer Matt Porio contributed to this story.

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