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Investigation Finds That Underage New Yorkers Have Easy Access to Alcohol at Local Pharmacy, Grocery, and Liquor Stores

Underage decoys visited 911 stores, 58 percent sold alcohol to minors DOHMH educating store owners and launching social media campaign to engage adults to reduce sales of alcohol to minors; NYPD will expand enforcement to ensure retailers follow alcohol laws

The Health Department today announced the results of an undercover investigation of underage access to alcohol in New York City conducted last year. Using a \$147,000 grant from the Health Department, the New York State Liquor Authority (SLA) created a dedicated unit to investigate and document underage sales by licensed retailers throughout New York City. Between April and September, the SLA conducted visits with underage decoys to 911 pharmacy, grocery and liquor stores throughout the five boroughs. This reflects 10 percent of New York City stores with liquor licenses. Fifty-eight percent of the stores sold alcohol to the decoys, who were all under 21 years of age. Costs associated with underage drinking, such as healthcare and law enforcement, are estimated to exceed \$1 billion per year in New York State.

“The Health Department is stepping up education efforts to reduce underage alcohol consumption, because we know that the younger someone starts drinking alcohol the more likely the person is to become dependent on alcohol,” said Commissioner Mary T. Bassett, MD, MPH. “Furthermore, reducing access to alcohol will also curtail underage drinking and reduce the nearly 7,000 alcohol-related emergency room visits among New Yorkers under age 21.”

“The youth of this city are very important to the law enforcement community,” said Police Commissioner William J. Bratton. “The sale of alcohol to underage persons is against the law and creates the potential for negative and deadly consequences. We will continue to partner with the Health Department to prevent underage drinking

and focus our resources on businesses that do not obey the liquor laws designed to prevent individuals under 21 from having easy access to alcohol.”

“We will continue do whatever it takes to crack down on underage drinking and hold accountable those who sell alcohol to minors,” said State Liquor Authority Chief Executive Officer Kerri O’Brien. “These underage details will continue, as will our commitment to preventing children from purchasing and abusing alcohol.”

In a letter sent that will be sent tomorrow to all New York City stores licensed to sell beer, wine, or liquor, Commissioner Bassett requests their help in reducing the negative consequences of underage drinking. The letter includes information about the negative effects of underage drinking and encourages retailers to ensure that IDs are checked during alcohol purchases and to seek additional training to help staff avoid selling to minors. The Health Department also unveiled a new social media video that reminds adults to help reduce youth access to alcohol by calling 311 to report stores that sell to underage buyers.

In response to this investigation, the Health Department in the next few months will sponsor Alcohol Training Awareness Programs (ATAP) for stores that sell alcohol. This training program equips participants with skills, such as recognizing fake IDs, which will help reduce the frequency of sales to underage buyers. In addition, the Health Department translated the SLA Handbook for Retail Licensees into two languages most often requested by callers to the SLA: Mandarin and Arabic. In the coming months, the Health Department will support expanded NYPD enforcement to ensure retailers follow alcohol beverage control laws.

Licensees charged by the SLA with underage sales face civil penalties of up to \$10,000 per violation, with fines starting from \$2,500 for a first-time offense. Repeat offenders also face potential suspension or revocation of their licenses. During this investigation, stores with previous violations were less likely to sell than stores without recent citations. Proof of participation in ATAP can reduce the penalties levied upon businesses that unknowingly sell to minors.

For more information on the risks of underage drinking, visit nyc.gov/health.

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