

*Talk It Up! Column*

**NC Alcohol Sales and the Health of Our Communities**

*Paige Schildkamp, Program Assistant*

*Orange Partnership for Alcohol and Drug Free Youth*

Last September, we wrote about the history of the state control system for alcohol in North Carolina. We talked about how the system came to exist and why Orange Partnership, as a coalition of many community organizations and public health/safety agencies, support the continuation of the ABC system in the face of periodic pushes for the privatization of the system. This was a timely article, as it coincided with the state's Program Evaluation Division compiling its report on NC's ABC Liquor System. The report's findings, which were released to the public on February 11, 2019, supports many of the points OP made in that September piece.

First, and most importantly, the PED does *not* recommend privatization of liquor sales. They support the continued existence of the current ABC system. Primarily, this conclusion is reached based on the effectiveness of the current system. The PED reports that, among southeastern states, NC collects the most revenue per gallon of liquor sold, while still having the lowest outlet density and second lowest per capita consumption. This is both a financial benefit to the state, while simultaneously being a public health protective factor. As we know, increased outlet density leads in turn to increased consumption, which has myriad negative health and safety effects on the population as a whole and, especially, on underage youth. (Remember, when youth begin drinking before age 15, they are 5 times more likely to develop alcohol dependency later in life and, among adults who are considered "heavy drinkers," almost 97% began before age 21. This doesn't even take into account the related consequences to underage drinking, like traffic crashes, high risk sexual activity, injury, violence, property damage, and more that cost NC taxpayers over \$1.3 billion in 2013 alone.)

ABC Commission Chairman Guy's response to the Report was as follows: "...this finding validates North Carolina's current system and would prompt me to have concerns about making significant changes to a model that has worked so well for eight decades and continues to work well for the people of the state." OP would like to add an additional point to this statement, regarding how the current ABC system works for the people. Local ABC Boards, who receive no state funding, are required to reinvest 7% of their profits into their communities, supporting education, prevention and addiction treatment efforts. Locally, the Orange County ABC Board reinvests even more than that 7% and, last year, gave back \$244,000. What an incredible community benefit, not even mentioned in the PED report, that would be lost if the ABC system was abolished.

However, the PED did recognize that the current ABC system is not perfect and recommend alternative ways that NC could choose to modernize its system. Some of these, like requiring counties with multiple local boards to form merged ABC boards, are fairly neutral as far as the public health point of view is concerned. Others, like considering allowing local governments to enact ordinances that permit Sunday sales or allowing in-store product tasting of liquor products, are cause for a bit more concern. There are many possible negative public health ramifications to recommendations like those, which absolutely must be taken into account.

These recommendations, along with those made in the rest of the report, were all based on financial and business-focused benefits. The ultimate recommendation, to continue with the current ABC system instead of moving to a privatized system, benefits public health work and the safety of our local communities and youth. However, the fact remains that those reasons were not specifically mentioned in the report as reasons supporting the decision. While the economy is important, it should not overtake the potential public health ramifications and related costs. Legislators must balance these considerations for the future of our communities and especially our young people.