

PRESENTATION
HOPE TAFT, FIRST LADY OF OHIO
ON BEHALF OF THE *LEADERSHIP TO KEEP CHILDREN ALCOHOL FREE*
INTERAGENCY COORDINATING COMMITTEE ON UNDERAGE DRINKING
PRINCIPALS MEETING
APRIL 13, 2004

Good afternoon, as First Lady of Ohio, I represent the 35 current Governors' spouses and 16 Emeritus Members of the *Leadership to Keep Children Alcohol Free* national initiative. For the past four years, I have been the Co-Chair of this unique non-partisan coalition of Governors' spouses, Federal agencies, and public and private organizations. We are devoted to increasing public awareness, engaging policy makers, and mobilizing action to stop childhood drinking. Our specific focus is on children ages nine to 15.

- We are fortunate to have the Surgeon General as our partner in this campaign. On April 28, 2003, Dr. Carmona made a commitment to us to support a *Call to Action on Childhood Drinking*.
- As the "nation's doctor," the Surgeon General provides a crucial voice on this issue. Childhood and adolescent drinking are major public health issues. Who is better equipped than the Surgeon General to convince our nation and its leaders to move with determination to address the problems of childhood and underage drinking? It is time to fully engage him in these efforts.
- The IOM report recommends first steps: raising adult awareness of underage drinking and encouraging adults to take responsibility for helping to prevent it; engaging advertisers and the entertainment media in efforts to reduce youth exposure to messages about the appeal of alcohol; strengthening compliance with laws and regulations that prevent minors from purchasing alcohol; equalizing taxes; implementing youth outreach programs; and establishing this federal interagency committee on preventing underage drinking.
- To implement these or any other strategy to prevent childhood drinking, we need support from educators, health care providers, law enforcement, parents, policymakers, retailers, advertisers, the alcohol industry, the entertainment industry and youth. And we need our own nation's leaders to embrace and promote that strategy.
- We can no longer allow parents to bear all the responsibility - to become the scapegoat because we all affect the outcome of children. Our children thrive when they have a protective shield around them composed of adults and corporations who have the best interest of children as their core principles. These groups would then hold the future of the United States in high regard.

- The IOM report, with a few changes, is a good first step in the many needed to stop childhood drinking.
- Ongoing research indicates that alcohol abuse is a developmental disorder that has its roots early in life, underscoring what the *Leadership* has championed as a critical focus – childhood and adolescent drinking. This is clearly a children’s health issue with serious implications for lifelong health and well-being. Young people do not suddenly decide in high school to begin drinking. It starts far earlier – in childhood, sometimes tragically, before age 6. (In my own state, 234 six to twelve year olds were in AOD treatment services in FY 2003.
- Research into the scope of alcohol use by children and adolescents under age 12 will provide much-needed insight into the influences, motivations, reasons, and trends surrounding underage drinking.
- Continued research on the developmental course of alcohol abuse will help us to develop effective, age-appropriate prevention and intervention strategies.
- Expanded research on the possible consequences of early alcohol use with a major focus on short and long term affects on the developing brain will clarify the risks of childhood and adolescent drinking, may help explain addiction, and will inform prevention and intervention efforts.
- Documenting the cause of unintended deaths and second hand effects of alcohol use by young people on those that are not drinking will help us understand the far reaching ripple implications.
- In addition to urging follow through on the recommendations made in the IOM report, we respectfully suggest the following next steps for the Federal government:
 - **Undertake a series of Surgeon General reports that scope out the entire health problem beginning with the health impact of alcohol from age 1 to age 21.**
 - **Commit the funding necessary for prevention and research to combat the problem based on the fact that alcohol is the #1 drug of choice among young people and kills and injures more than all illicit drugs combined and is most often the first drug tried by children.**
 - **Invest in precise and more extensive data collection in order to determine the scope of the existing problem, factors that motivate young people to drink, and to facilitate the monitoring of trends and effective interventions.**

- **In conducting national surveys, include questions to determine the extent of second hand effects of alcohol use such as deaths, assaults, date rape, classroom disruptions, and so forth.**
- **Provide additional funding for research especially on prevention approaches focusing on elementary and middle school aged children, both to generate new interventions and for the evaluation of existing programs.**
- **Provide additional funding for research on the effects of alcohol on the developing brain.**

The Governors' spouses are committed to preventing childhood drinking. The fate of our children is in adult hands. Underage drinking must not be minimized or trivialized.

I recently received a letter from actor/producer Henry Winkler who has worked with me on my Smart and Sober initiative. He said, "Everybody has some greatness in them, and it is our job to dig down deep and find out what that is, and then give it to the world as a gift. How tragic it is that so many of the valuable youth in this country are not sober enough to clearly find their important strengths in order to contribute their gifts to the world."

We need everyone's gifts and best efforts on behalf of children including those who testify today, and yours. You have a daunting task, but also a great deal of support for your work. The Leadership cheers you on and will closely follow the outcome of your deliberations.

Thank you for this opportunity to present on behalf *Leadership to Keep Children Alcohol Free* national initiative.