

February 28, 2003

Risa Lavizzo-Mourey , MD, MBA
President and CEO
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
P.O. Box 2316
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Princeton, NJ 08543

Dear Dr. Lavizzo-Mourey:

We are writing to alert The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to a unique historical opportunity. The current budget crisis facing states across the nation threatens our country's basic public health infrastructure. Ironically, it also creates a means to reduce in part the erosion of public health institutions. State legislatures are actively considering raising alcohol taxes as a means to address their looming deficits. Bills in at least fifteen states have already been introduced. In California, for example, a proposal is now being considered to raise alcohol fees by a nickel a drink to reimburse the costs of alcohol-related trauma in the state's emergency rooms, which are otherwise in danger of closing.

Research demonstrates that alcohol taxes function similarly to tobacco taxes – increases in alcohol taxes will significantly reduce the negative consequences of alcohol use, particularly among young people. Increased alcohol taxes have both immediate and long-term impacts, by reducing alcohol-related violence and trauma, as well as alcohol-related disease. Raising alcohol taxes represents one of the most effective public health interventions available to our nation.

Unfortunately, the political debate regarding alcohol taxes is floundering in misinformation and is unduly influenced by the alcohol industry, which has a vested interest in steering legislators from this important public health intervention. In several states, legislators are instead considering avenues for increasing alcohol sales (thereby increasing tax revenues without increasing tax rates), for example, by permitting increased days and hours of sale and increased number of alcohol outlets. Research shows this is a losing proposition. Revenues may increase, but public health costs will soar. Raising alcohol taxes, on the other hand, will increase revenues and reduce, rather than increase, public health costs. The political debate has become so dominated by vested interests that the only serious proposal regarding alcohol taxes in Congress is one sponsored by the beer industry to reduce beer taxes.

Surveys, including those funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, show that a large majority of Americans support increased alcohol taxes, particularly if they are dedicated to public health and safety programs. Yet the public is not being heard in the political debate.

An aggressive educational campaign is needed now to promote alcohol taxes as a step toward solving the states' budget crises, providing desperately needed funds for public health programs, and reducing public health problems.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is in a unique position to lead such an educational campaign. It is a leader in improving the health of Americans and is in the forefront of the citizen movement to prevent alcohol-related problems. Through its efforts, state and local alcohol policy coalitions are promoting policy reform, including excise tax reform, in communities throughout the nation. For example, RWJ has supported the Center for Science in the Public Interest, which has conducted trainings, developed resource materials, and provided technical assistance to numerous state coalitions seeking higher excise taxes. New funders are now following RWJ's lead and providing increased focus on alcohol policy, most notably the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention in the US Department of Justice. This new infrastructure is gaining strength, but does not have the resources to respond effectively or in a coordinated fashion to the alcohol industry's national effort to thwart alcohol tax reform.

* We urge you to consider building on the foundation that has already been laid and implement an immediate, focused, national educational campaign on alcohol tax policy, to be instituted as soon as possible. Such a campaign can provide technical support that would include responses to industry arguments, background reports, a speaker's bureau, legal technical assistance, media advocacy campaigns in support of state action, educational fora to link community and state alcohol policy organizations, and other educational efforts in support of alcohol tax policy reform. These efforts, which do not include lobbying of any sort, will insure that the policy debates are balanced and include a public health perspective. They will provide a means to organize a national response to the alcohol industry's campaign and insure that the tax proposals are not killed state by state.

We would welcome an opportunity to meet with you and your staff to discuss how to take advantage of this unique historical opportunity to substantially reduce alcohol-related harm across our nation.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Deborah Cohen, RAND Corporation
James F. Mosher, JD, Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation
Additional Signators [Approval obtained by e-mail correspondence]