Alliance aims to end bar loophole

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BATON ROUGE — Sex. Driving. Alcohol. In the 1990s, all three have their inherent dangers. Add to them the prefix "teen" and the risk of behaving irresponsibly grows, say proponents of stricter drinking laws.

And it is to that end that the Louisiana Alliance to Prevent Underage Drinking hopes to see new legislation that will, among other things, take 18- to 20-year-olds out of bars across the state.

Of numerous policy initiatives advanced by the alliance, which held its annual conference last week in Baton Rouge, removing what some people call the "21 to drink, 18 to be seen" loophole is their highest priority. Current law allows 18-year-olds to enter a bar, but not drink.

"I think youths tend to drink more in a much shorter time than adults, generally kids go out to change the way they feel ... they drink to get a buzz," says Sharron Ayers, the state project director.

Ayers says people under 21 are still getting access to alcohol, and the alcohol industry is doing little to discourage them.

"I think it would be definitely better to enforce the laws themselves, and I think the bars are improving greatly ... but we hear all the time that when they go in for any kind of compliance checks, the drinks (those under 21 have) are either passed or dropped," Ayers said.

And while Alliance supporters paint underage drinkers as victims of "commercial" socialization, alcohol industry representatives preach about individual responsibility.

Chris Young, a former bartender and doorman, is now an

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attorney who represents the Beer Industry Council of Louisiana.

Young, who spoke on a panel at the two-day conference, says he is against taking under-21s out of bars. In fact, he advocates returning the state’s drinking age to 18 and says most voters would, too. Young said for it to be anything but 18 violates the Louisiana Constitution, which states it is illegal to discriminate based on age.

“I believe if this issue ever went to a vote ... you’d be surprised,” Young said. “If you send this issue to a vote of the people, and they vote to make it 21, we’ll never bring it up again.”

Rev. Michael Pfleger, who described industry leaders as “drug pushers in three-piece suits,” says not only should people under 21 stay out of bars, but Louisiana should also implement the much debated .08 blood alcohol content level and adopt an open container law.

Currently, the legal blood alcohol content limit (also known as BAC) with which one can drive an automobile is .10. Attempts to change that to .08 at this year’s legislative special session failed to get past the Judiciary Committee that considers legislation on criminal law.

A statewide survey conducted by Southern Media and Opinion Research of Baton Rouge, however, shows that 79 percent support reducing the legal limit to .08.

Pfleger, a Chicago Catholic priest who made national news after facing criminal charges for painting over alcohol billboards in the city, also criticized the industry for targeting minors in their advertisements.

Pfleger would not, however, put all the blame on businesses. He says much of the responsibility lies with the family, which for most kids is the first place they see alcohol used irresponsibly.

“What we’re teaching our children is that in order to have a good time we need to have alcohol,” Pfleger says. But, he says, all that can change. “Beating alcohol in Louisiana is winnable, if we go in it to win and not just to make things better.”