Legislature urged to close loophole in alcohol sales law

By DOUG MYERS
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A private coalition took aim Thursday on state lawmakers who have refused to pass a law that would make it illegal for businesses to sell alcohol to people under age 21.

Leaders of The Coalition to Close Louisiana’s Loophole warned of the ill effects of allowing businesses to sell alcohol to people aged 18 through 20.

The group urged the public to ask legislators to vote to plug the loophole.

State law now prohibits those young adults from buying alcohol, but it doesn’t prohibit businesses from selling alcohol to them.

Alcohol industry officials have fought the proposal for years, arguing the problem lies with state officials not enforcing the ban on underage drinking.

Kathy duTreil, coordinator of the coalition, said alcohol is used more frequently than any other drug by young people because it is so easily obtained.

The coalition coordinator blamed alcohol for “a number of social and medical problems.”

“Alcohol is responsible for incidents of rape, especially date rape, unplanned and unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, poor grades and school dropouts, especially among our college freshmen and sophomores,” duTreil said.

She said binge drinking also is a problem.

“Some of these have been fatal,” duTreil said. “A lot of them have required hospitalization.”

A proposal is being pushed in the Legislature by 15 representatives and seven senators to make it illegal for businesses to sell to 18- to 20-year-olds.

The proposal has the support of Attorney General Richard Ieyoub, the Louisiana State Police, the State Office of Alcoholic Beverage Control, the Louisiana Chiefs of Police Association and the Louisiana Sheriffs Association.

“What we have heard for the past two years from all the chiefs and sheriffs and state police is the law as it exists is a total farce. It is a joke. It cannot be enforced,” duTreil said. “The loophole has to be closed.”

Also in support of the proposal Thursday were Baton Rouge Metro Council members Linda Imes, Tom Woods and Roxson Welch.

Imes said the Baton Rouge Metro Council passed a resolution about three weeks ago in support of the proposal.

John Welborn Jr., chief investigator for the East Baton Rouge Parish Office of Alcoholic Beverage Control, said there has been a problem locally of 18-, 19- and 20-year-old people buying alcohol for minors.

“Since we identified the weakness in the state law pertaining to the sale of alcohol, we strongly recommend legislation that will close that loophole,” Welborn said.

The alcohol industry says the problem lies with the regulators, not the law.

Alcohol industry officials have said it is unpopular and inconvenient for agents to cite people for drinking who are old enough to go to war, vote and get married.

The industry also has argued agents need to concentrate on liquor violations involving people under age 18.