

Drinking called overblown

By LEVA AUGSTUMS
Assignment Reporter

When 50 UNL and Lincoln high school students were asked Thursday night how they could stop binge drinking on campus, no one came up with a clear, concise answer.

However, Michael Haines, Health Enhancement Services Coordinator for Northern Illinois University, did.

"You have to use proactive language to tell people the truth about alcohol," Haines said. "No one wants to be told to stop doing something with force."

For the past eight years, Haines has been working with NIU and other universities to help curb student binge drinking on campus.

Linda Major, coordinator of alcohol and drug programs at the University Health Center, said the University of Nebraska-Lincoln also is applying for a \$700,000 grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to combat binge drinking on campus.

Bringing in Haines to speak, however, was an unrelated part of the effort to curb binge drinking, she said.

The program at Northern Illinois may be one way to win the drinking battle, she said.

Haines said the "drinking battle" that most campuses are beginning to fight has begun because college students believe that more of their peers are binge drinkers than there are in reality.

"Students don't talk about their peers who choose not to drink — the invisible ones," Haines said. "The drunk guy pouring mustard on himself and saying, 'I'm a hot dog,' is the type of person everyone notices and talks about."

Concerned with the well-being of college students, Haines said that before any program can be implemented, students need to have a clear understanding of the term binge drinking.

According to a 1995 national survey of 1,005 students from 20 colleges, college students characterize binge drinking as having a long period time — 12-36 hours — of high doses of alcohol, usually 12-30 drinks.

That definition, which Haines uses, conflicts with the one used by many government agencies: five drinks in two weeks at any one occasion.

Haines said a drink is either a bottle

of beer, a glass of wine, a wine cooler, a shot of liquor or a mixed drink.

Many students who adhere to the typical one-drink-per-hour philosophy are considered responsible drinkers, Haines said.

But because the average college party lasts five hours, students who drink moderately are considered binge drinkers because they've had five drinks, he said.

Tricia Akerlund, a senior advertising major, said the decision for a student to drink or even drink responsibly is a personal choice.

"Students often try drinking to see if it is a type of lifestyle they like and want to have," Akerlund said. "There's no way of preventing that."

Haines reported fewer students are drinking this year than in 1996-97; however, he said the media's perception of college campus binge drinking does not portray it.

The public needs to ask itself if "the can is almost half empty or more than half full" in regard to how many students actually drink on college campuses," he said. Only then will the community support the battle against the binge.

State will get reimbursement

By BRIAN CARLSON
Senior Reporter

Although Nebraska hasn't filed suit against the tobacco industry, officials said Thursday the state will receive its share of a federal settlement.

Tobacco industry lawyers and attorneys general from 40 states reached a \$368.5 billion settlement in June. But the deal requires congressional approval, and many questions remain at all levels of government.

The biggest question for Nebraska officials has been how best to pursue the state's share — estimated at \$32 million in the first year — of the expected settlement.

Under the June agreement, tobacco companies would be required to dole out \$368.5 billion to states during 25 years to compensate for medical costs caused by smoking-related illnesses.

The settlement was the result of three years of class-action lawsuits by 40 states that claimed tobacco companies had lied about nicotine's effects and cost billions in Medicaid and private health care.

But Nebraska was one of 10 states that didn't sue, and some have worried the state could miss its share of the pie.

In a joint briefing before the Legislature's Appropriations and Health and Human Services Committees, Steve Grasz, chief deputy attorney general of Nebraska, told lawmakers not to worry.

Grasz said he and Attorney General Don Stenberg had received assurances from tobacco officials and those close to the congressional negotiations that the settlement would extend to all states.

Grasz said Nebraska decided not to sue because of costs, the early perception that success was unlikely and the fear of setting a legal precedent that could harm agriculture.

Under the June settlement, the industry would pay states \$7 billion in the first year, with about 0.46 percent, or \$32 million, coming to Nebraska.

All of this would be moot without congressional approval — a tough sell on Capitol Hill, Grasz acknowledged.

Part of the difficulty stems from President Clinton's desire to allow states \$196 billion of settlement money and use the rest to fund new federal programs, including children's health care.

U.S. lawmakers would find themselves in a bind, Grasz said. If they opposed Clinton's policies, they could be portrayed as pro-tobacco and opposed to children's health care. If they supported Clinton, they could cost their states millions in settlement funds.

"In any event, the settlement appears to be tangled in election-year politics," Grasz said.

David Remes, a Washington, D.C., attorney representing the tobacco com-

Legislature

panies, said several issues could hinder negotiations this year.

Settlement distribution among states, new authority for the Food and Drug Administration to regulate tobacco, and the tobacco industry's future immunity from class-action lawsuits are controversial, he said.

The June agreement barred further class-action lawsuits by states for past or future damages. However, individuals still may sue the industry.

Although many, including former U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, have disapproved of class-action immunity, the provision actually protects claimants, Remes said.

The agreement will protect tobacco

companies from bankruptcy and increase litigants' chances of winning claims, he said.

Remes predicted Congress would begin intense negotiations this spring and attempt to reach a deal before the August recess.

"The big tug of war will be over how much Washington keeps versus how much states receive," he said. "I think the Legislature should see how it can make its voices heard in Washington."

Although tobacco funds would boost the state's revenue, the agreement could affect Nebraska's coffers in other ways. Congress is considering raising the price of a pack of cigarettes by \$1.50 to \$2 to reduce youth smoking.

But as Sen. Roger Wehrbein of Plattsmouth, Appropriations chairman, noted, the cigarette tax hike would cut purchases and cause a decline in tax revenue.

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