

Baltimore Sun

City liquor board should safeguard residents' health

September 29, 2015

Baltimore has a liquor store problem. In our city, we have a higher concentration of liquor stores than anywhere else in our state. In fact, Baltimore City has one of the highest alcohol outlet densities per population in the entire country.

Research from across the United States — and right here in Baltimore — consistently shows that there is a direct correlation between the number, density, location and operational practices of alcohol outlets and the rates of violence, drunk driving, physical injuries, underage drinking, public nuisance activities and other social problems in communities. In short: Alcohol outlets pose a serious, documented health risk to citizens, especially those in urban settings. The disproportionately high volume of alcohol outlets in Baltimore magnifies the impact of a few irresponsible operators on our communities.

The duty of the Baltimore City Health Department is to promote health and advocate for every individual's well-being to achieve health care equity for all residents. Therefore, it is also the duty of the health department to stress the serious public health and safety risks posed by irresponsible distribution of alcohol and irresponsible alcohol outlet operators.

Under the law, local liquor boards are fundamentally public health agencies, which can and should encourage responsible business operations and take action against irresponsible operators who disobey the law and promote unsafe and violent behavior.

To do so effectively, the Baltimore City Liquor License Board can and should consult public health professionals when rendering decisions, and I am glad to offer myself — and the full power of the Baltimore City Health Department — as ready and willing consultants to the board.

The liquor board is under a clear legislative mandate to protect the public health. Maryland law explicitly states that the policy of alcohol laws and regulations exists in order to "obtain respect and obedience to law and to foster and promote temperance." Article 2B of the Maryland State Code states that policies exist to "regulate and control the manufacture, sale, distribution, transportation and storage of alcoholic beverages." Furthermore, the law dictates that this entire alcohol regulatory structure was created explicitly "for the protection, health, welfare and safety of the people."

Although the law makes it absolutely clear that state policy mandates that the liquor board exists to protect public health, this does not mean that board action is anti-business. Instead, this simply means that when rendering decisions, the [liquor board's primary concern](#) must be for the health and safety of the community.

To use an example highlighting this point: Last month, the board made a decision that allowed a bar with a contentious community relationship [to reopen](#) after serving only half its suspension. The bar reopened, despite significant community opposition, with the only requirement that they enter into a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the community — a decision the board

believed would mitigate any problems. Perhaps if a public health professional had been consulted, the liquor board would have known that Stadium Lounge had previously entered into an MOU with the neighborhood — one that failed to alleviate the conflict.

The Baltimore City Health Department is uniquely equipped to provide a public health perspective to the liquor board. Through epidemiological analysis, the health department can use science, data and statistics to provide a portrait of specific health impacts of liquor outlet operations. Through our clinical services and community outreach, we can obtain a greater understanding of the needs of our residents in neighborhoods across our city. Through our collaboration with partners across the city, we can shed further light on community dynamics as it relates to substance abuse, addiction and mental health. Consulting with public health professionals will not only promote good business practices but will also reaffirm residents' faith in the board's decisions.

As public servants, we must consider how all of our decisions will impact the lives of our citizens. The Baltimore City Liquor License Board must understand and embrace its role as protectors of public health and ensure its decisions safeguard the health, welfare and safety of all Baltimore residents.

If the liquor board members are willing to do so, they have willing and ready partners in the public health leadership of Baltimore City.

Dr. Leana Wen is the Baltimore City health commissioner; Twitter: @bmore_healthy and @DrLeanaWen.