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California should not extend bar hours to 4 a.m.



Richard L. Zaldivar is co-chair of the California Alcohol Policy Alliance and Executive Director & Founder, The Wall Las Memorias Project.

California needs more positive spaces for its LGBTQ+ residents—spaces that promote acceptance, solidarity, and health. Yet in a move that would make the Trump administration proud, one of California's most prominent gay legislators is masking a campaign to deregulate a lethal industry under the guise of helping the LGBTQ+ community.

For almost three years now, State Sen. Scott Wiener (D-San Francisco) has been working to extend bar closing times from the 2 a.m. statewide standard to 4 a.m. His third effort is SB 58, which recently passed in May from the Senate to the Assembly. We are finding tremendous grassroots LGBTQ+ opposition to 4 a.m. bars at Pride events this year.

SB 58 openly recognizes that the economic windfall will be reaped by the large hotels, convention halls, nightclubs and developers that endorse the bill. As with so many other public health catastrophes, that sort of money chasing leaves the LGBTQ+ community to bear a disproportionate share of the harm. When Gov. Jerry Brown, Jr. vetoed the last year's bill he said, "I believe we have enough mischief from midnight to 2 without adding two more hours of mayhem."

There is plenty of harm to go around. Alcohol use kills over 10,600 Californians yearly, or one alcohol-related death per hour. While 159,000 Californians receive treatment for alcohol abuse, that represents less than 15% of the number in need of it. Alcohol use costs the state \$35 billion annually, of which \$25.8 billion stems directly from binge drinking. And these numbers are rising fast. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) scientists report that rates of alcohol abuse increased nearly 50% in a decade. Far from generating money for the state, early-morning bar times will worsen all of these figures.

Research shows that extending last call times is associated with increases in violence, injury, assault, intoxicated driving, and stress on emergency services. This impact has been recognized worldwide. Restricted bar closing hours have been endorsed by the World Health Organization, United States Surgeon General, and CDC among many other U.S. and international public health authorities. When these recommendations are ignored, LGBTQ+ Californians stand to see the worst of it.

After all, the purpose of the bill is ultimately to sell more alcohol. Research shows that the LGBTQ+ population suffers from substance use problems at a higher rate than the country as a whole, so if drinking goes up, it will go up proportionally more in the LGBTQ+ community. Aside from the evident long-term threats to health from alcohol-related disease, the short-term risk of accidental death and injury, and the problems with friends, family and employers, LGBTQ+ individuals face more specific risks.

For men, heavy drinking increases the odds of risky sex. Worse, it makes it more likely that someone will fall off their medication schedule, and 100% of doctors agree: PrEP does not work if you do not take it. Lesbians are far more likely to be heavy drinkers throughout their lives. Young transgender adults, meanwhile, engage in extraordinarily high rates of heavy drinking, and are more likely to be victims of verbal threats and sexual assault the more they drink. LGBTQ individuals run higher rates of depression and suicidal ideation, and tragedy after tragedy has demonstrated alcohol's ability to turn ideation into action.

This is not to say gay bars in particular are a problem. They have been, and remain, an essential part of the LGBTQ+ landscape, creating both safe spaces for young people to grow into their identity and vital links to the history and struggle of the community. However, we should not make the mistake of seeing people driven to bond over drinking because of shared pain and stigma, and assuming alcohol is a cure for those things. Alcohol creates its own forms of pain, one that weighs even more heavily on those already struggling with issues of judgment and representation.

With this in mind, it is imperative that leaders in the community such as Sen. Wiener make an effort to envision a growing and vibrant LGBTQ+ culture that does not hinge on increasing the amount of alcohol people drink. We reject SB 58. It serves up money to the alcohol industry over the bodies of LGBTQ+ Californians, bodies those same Americans have fought for fifty years to have respected. The band should not play on to 4 a.m.

We have created an LGBTQ+ Caucus of the California Alcohol Policy Alliance to take action against the attack on our community under the guise of saving the gay bar scene. Take action by going to <https://bit.ly/2JHrKc1>. To join the Caucus and take action at Pride events contact MayraJ@AlcoholJustice.org.