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Alcohol Justice Calls for New Authorities on Alcohol Harm after USDA Abandons Protective Guidelines

SAN RAFAEL, Calif., January 12, 2026 (PRNewswire.com)—In the wake of last week’s release of a [2026-2030 USDA Dietary Guidelines for Americans \(DGA\)](#) devoid of any concrete advice around alcohol consumption, Alcohol Justice is calling for credible, science-driven groups to step up with actionable information about alcohol harm.

An impactful and effective set of behavioral guidelines for alcohol consumption must, at minimum, include three elements:

- A clear description of the risks
- Concise actions that one can take to reduce those risks
- Thorough and easy-to-find documentation of the data used to make the recommendations

The most recent DGA guidelines contain none of those. The document fails to acknowledge the long-standing maximum consumption levels of years, and removes the explanations of the risks of even light drinking that had been in past editions. Instead, the agency pared the advice down to bullet points. The first bullet advises U.S. residents to “[c]onsume less alcohol for better overall health.” A second bullet warns certain groups to exercise particular caution, including pregnant women, people with a history of alcohol use disorder, and people taking medications that interact with alcohol. There is no third bullet point.

“We all deserve rational, well-supported advice for how to live longer and be healthier,” said Miryom Yisrael, Executive Director of Alcohol Justice. *“It is sad and frustrating to see the USDA abdicating its responsibility to educate the public on alcohol harm.”*

“On the other hand,” she added, *“things could have been a lot worse.”*

The stripped-down guidelines create a mixed blessing for public health advocacy. As an element of health education, they failure to provide plain cues that would inspire someone to aggressively cut back on their drinking. At the same time, the prior DGA guidelines—one drink per day for women, two per day for men—were increasingly disconnected from the preponderance of evidence around alcohol harm, which show no safe level of consumption. Early leaks suggested the USDA might even *endorse* lower levels of drinking, in line with a deeply flawed study the industry had been aggressively promoting as the last word on alcohol harm. The language does clearly establish that, no matter how much you drink, you are healthier if you drink less. But it fails to translate that truth into an actual behavioral target.

If the USDA will not provide these targets and inspire positive health behavior change, the public desperately needs someone else to.

“The death rates from alcohol have been steadily climbing over the last decade,” said Carson Benowitz-Fredericks, MSPH, Research Director for Alcohol Justice. *“There is no way to stop that without confronting the truth that, no matter who you are, less alcohol means less harm.”*

Alcohol-related mortality, already one of the leading preventable causes of death in the United States, has skyrocketed in recent years. [The number of deaths climbed 29% between 2016 and 2021](#), according to a 2024 CDC report from the alcohol harm monitoring team recently disbanded as part of the administration’s recent restructuring of that institution. The overall burden of alcohol-related harms, including health impacts, crime, and drains on the economy, costs the U.S. \$249 billion per year. Although acute alcohol-related injuries and deaths, including motor vehicle crashes, suicides, and homicides, capture much of the headlines, [over half of all mortality is due to the cumulative, chronic effects of overconsumption](#).

Alcohol affects many organs and systems within the body, including the heart, brain, liver, and digestive tract, and fatal consequences can arise from any of those. A significant segment of that mortality, however, comes from cancer, including breast cancer. Approximately 1 in 6 of breast cancer diagnoses in the United States—over 51,000 in 2025—are caused by alcohol use. Like several other cancers, the risk of breast cancer rises with every sip of alcohol, from an 11.3% lifetime chance of contracting breast cancer in women drinking fewer than 1 alcoholic drink per week, to 13.1% in those having one per day, to 15.3% among those who have 2 per day. Yet awareness of those risks remains low, with only 24.4% of women in a recent poll asserting there was “definitely” a link between alcohol and breast cancer. The need for education and awareness does not end with those directly affected by cancer and other health impacts, but extends to their peers and healthcare providers as well.

“A good set of guidelines brings everyone together,” Yisrael said. *“Friends, family, partner, healthcare providers, our whole circle helps look after one another. That’s missed in these guidelines, but that doesn’t mean we’re not still looking for ways to support one another.”*

An effective set of guidelines needs to be able to encourage behavior change in a range of people harmed by alcohol. Although it does address some priority groups, it misses the fact that the people most in need of guidance are those who do not already have obvious reasons to be concerned. In particular, youth consumption is completely ignored, even though the guidelines have another section specifically dedicated to special dietary considerations by age.

“Our community partners across California see firsthand that alcohol-related harm extends well beyond dependency, affecting health, safety, and well-being across the lifespan, particularly for youth,” said Raul Verdugo, Advocacy Director for Alcohol Justice. *“While these guidelines are not exhaustive, they open the door to clearer, evidence-based conversations about alcohol and health and support more informed decision-making for Californians.”*

With the DGA providing loose guidance at best, the conversation about alcohol harm has to be picked up by other NGOs, community groups, or medical authorities. In the short term, Alcohol Justice recommends the following resources:

- Alcohol Justice, [“Alcohol’s Impacts on Health” FAQ](#)
- The United States Alcohol Policy Alliance, [“Alcohol Consumption Guidelines for the American People”](#)
- The Mayo Clinic, [“Alcohol Use: Weighing Risks and Benefits”](#)

But in the long run, it may require an agreement to rely on a single reputable source for alcohol recommendations, to both overcome vague recommendations and cut through endless accusations of politicization in federal health promotion. Some possibilities exist within the [“states compacts”](#) that have emerged to generate evidence-based vaccine policy. Another major domestic NGO such as the American Public Health Association could step into the gap as well. Regardless, the decisions at the USDA have cleared the ground for a major reconsideration of how we educate, prevent, and protect our fellow U.S. residents.

“The USDA Dietary Guidelines have long been mired in the ‘one for women, two for men,’ paradigm,” said Benowitz-Fredericks. *“Yet the past decades of research has undercut that advice, showing it still can lead to disease and death. Now is the time to build new structures for outreach and prevention that can save lives for generations to come.”*

Alcohol Justice is a nonprofit based in San Rafael, California, dedicated to advancing evidence-based policy that promotes public health and safety. For more information, please see www.alcoholjustice.org.