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A Toast to the Good Folks at Meadowood

“I thought it was the stupidest thing I’d ever heard,” Ruth Engs recalls thinking when she learned that the Indiana State Excise Police told administrators at Meadowood Retirement Community that they could no longer serve beer and wine to residents during social hour without a retail license and licensed servers. “It isn’t a bar. It’s their home. It’s just so silly.”

Engs is a professor emeritus at Indiana University and a public health educator who has spent a good part of her career researching and writing about the personal and social effects of alcohol consumption. She’s visited friends at Meadowood for the long-standing weekly social hour and seen that it’s hardly a bacchanalian event. “These are mature adults,” she says with a note of indignation.

“Plus there is research that shows that when people socialize, they perk up. If you get a half a dozen people from a nursing home or retirement community in a room, they often tend to not interact. But if you give them a glass of wine or a cocktail, they begin to talk.”

In this situation, alcohol as a social lubricant is, in a very real sense, therapeutic. Some of the well-documented enemies of aging well, and longevity, are loneliness, isolation, and depression.

Excise police visited Meadowood because of a complaint from someone they won’t identify that the retirement facility was selling alcohol to its residents. “This is prohibited by Indiana law in any context (private residence, apartment complex, social club, restaurant, etc.), unless an alcoholic beverage permit is issued to the premise and those serving (selling) possess a valid server permit,” Officer Brandon Thomas wrote in an email exchange.

Meadowood puts out beer and wine along with soft drinks and hors d’oeuvres at its Friday social hour and

does not charge residents for any of it. Is that selling? As for other contexts, people regularly pony up contributions to offset alcohol costs at private parties, apartment complex clubhouses, and college fraternities. So “selling alcohol” seems to be a matter of semantics.

Excise police say Meadowood and other such facilities can allow residents to bring their own alcohol to social hour — and that’s also a dumb idea, according to Engs. “If you bring your own bottle there is a tendency to drink more than you would if it’s served by the glass. And there’s also a safety issue. Making elderly people on canes and walkers carry their own booze? Really?” It’s not the case at most senior living communities but Meadowood does have lockers adjacent to the party lounge where residents can store their liquor.

Every state has its own alcohol laws, thanks to the 21st Amendment, and there are head-scratching idiosyncrasies to all of them. Indiana, however, is the only state in the country to not allow Sunday package liquor sales (with some small and specific exceptions).

State Rep. Matt Pierce, D-Bloomington, thinks Meadowood, Bell Trace, and other retirement communities should be able to have social hours without spending thousands on permits that really ought to apply to retail establishments — bars, restaurants, and social clubs. “I have already written the chair of the House Public Policy Committee asking him to help me correct the idiocy,” he wrote in mid-July. “I am awaiting his reply.”

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