

Lifeline Law Provides Limited Immunity For Alcohol Charges

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The death of an IU student last weekend is shedding light on Indiana's Lifeline Law, which grants immunity to intoxicated minors who seek medical attention for a friend who has also been drinking.

Nineteen-year-old Rachael Fiege was unconscious for six hours after falling down a flight of stairs before her friends called the police. Toxicology reports have not been released to determine whether alcohol was involved. And her friends said they knew about Indiana's Lifeline law.

If they were drinking, Fiege's friends would have been exempt from underage drinking charges but Fiege would not.

State Senator Jim Merritt authored the law and says that's because he doesn't want to encourage binge drinking.

"I do believe that college kids and high school kids and sometimes seventh and eighth graders make mistakes but I did not want to grant the same immunities to that individual who needs medical care," he says.

Merritt says he's heard of several instances where students have taken advantage of the law. But IU Law Professor David Orentlicher says the fact that the law doesn't protect everyone legally could deter some minors from seeking help.

"The goal of this is to encourage people to make the call, right? So if you give immunity to the caller- that obviously is going to help. But, you know, they're going to have to worry that if I call, am I going to get this-my friend-into trouble," Orentlicher says.

Indiana's bill was inspired by a similar Cornell University policy. That policy, however, grants amnesty to every person involved.

If some of this is still unclear, here are four of the most important things to know about Indiana's Lifeline law:

- The law only provides minors immunity for crimes such as: public intoxication, possession, consumption, and transportation of alcohol.
- Any other offense greater than those such as: providing alcohol to a minor, operating while intoxicated, or possessing a controlled substance is not covered by the Lifeline Law.
- Minors get immunity after they've shown that they're acting in good faith by cooperating with police and by staying at the scene until help arrives.
- The law does not cover the person receiving treatment or who needs medical attention. It only covers the person helping to seek medical attention.