

New alcohol-related laws go into effect in Md., Va.

[Other laws taking effect in Virginia](#) include a tea-party-backed initiative to issue “Don’t Tread on Me” and “In God We Trust” license plates; and a change to count the ballots of Virginians who vote early but die before Election Day.

Another new law extends protective court orders to cover people fearing harm from a dating or workplace relationship, not only from family members or stalkers.

Alcohol tax in Maryland

Across the river, in Maryland, [new laws taking effect](#) before the holiday weekend will affect nearly everything about the way people in the Old Line State consume alcohol.

The tax on each drink is going up, thousands of drunk drivers will be forced to install blood-alcohol testing devices in their cars and oenophiles will, for the first time, be legally able to [ship bottles of wine to their homes](#).

[The sales tax on beer, wine and liquor](#) will increase from 6 percent to 9 percent, marking the first alcohol-specific tax increase in Maryland in nearly 40 years.

The increase is a victory for health advocates and groups that run programs for the disabled, who had lobbied for the tax increase — expected to generate \$85 million or more a year — to restore funding for health and welfare programs hit hard by budget cuts.

Maryland lawmakers, who were more concerned with protecting education funding this year, earmarked most of the new revenue for classrooms, but at a celebration for the new tax in Annapolis on Thursday, advocates released a congratulatory letter from Gov. Martin O’Malley (D) that they said would bolster their attempts to keep the new funding centered on health programs in next year’s budget and beyond.

Another alcohol-related bill will require Maryland drivers younger than 21 who are caught behind the wheel with any alcohol in their blood to participate in the state’s [ignition-interlock program](#).

Drivers pulled over on suspicion of driving under the influence who refuse a roadside blood-alcohol test or those who fail such a test with a blood alcohol level of 0.15 or more will also face mandatory participation in the program.

The legislation is not nearly as comprehensive as that sought for years by Maryland’s chapter of MADD. The group continues to lobby for a state bill that would require everyone convicted of first-time drunken driving to have the device installed.

Maryland will join about three dozen other states that allow residents to have bottles of wine shipped directly to their doorsteps. After years of failed attempts, consumer groups overcame intense opposition from Maryland's alcohol lobby to legalize wine shipments directly from vineyards.

A scaled-backed version of one of O'Malley's 2011 priorities will also take effect Friday.

In a bid to bolster venture capital spending on Maryland start-ups, the state will allow insurance companies to bid to prepay state taxes at lower rates. The pool of money will be used to invest in private companies at the expense of future tax revenue. O'Malley says that the investment will result in successful new companies and a greater return to the state over the long term.

Several of the governor's lesser-known bills, including one setting up a framework for an insurance exchange under President Obama's health-care reform, will also take effect.

On Friday, tens of thousands of public employees and teachers in Maryland will see a bigger chunk of their pay taken for their retirement. To begin to control rising public pension costs, employee contributions will rise from 5 percent to 7 percent of pay. Other changes will limit benefits for some Maryland state workers. But in a nod to unions, some home health-care workers will gain collective-bargaining rights.

Among a handful of more obscure laws passed in the name of boosting the state's economy, restaurants will be allowed to let dog owners bring their pets to establishments with outdoor seating.

Staff writer Anita Kumar contributed to this report.