

New Ideas for Combating the Old Problem of Drunk Driving

By Rebecca Kanable

Law enforcement agencies throughout the country are taking new initiatives to combat drunk driving. They are not content to witness thousands of people die in alcohol-related crashes each year. Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) salutes the work of these agencies.

While technology may one day obliterate drunk driving, Carl McDonald, MADD national law enforcement initiative coordinator, says, “The only way to deter impaired driving today is to convince the public that in the future, they will not get away with this crime, as they have become accustomed to. That takes highly visible and sustained enforcement.”

LOW-MANPOWER CHECKPOINTS

The Ohio State Highway Patrol began using low-manpower OVI (operating a vehicle under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol) checkpoints this summer to deter and intercept impaired drivers. Traditionally, the Patrol utilized 25 to 30 troopers to staff a checkpoint. Now, when doing low-manpower checkpoints, five to 10 troopers staff a checkpoint, with additional officers on saturation patrols, looking for impaired drivers attempting to circumvent the checkpoint.

The Ohio State Highway Patrol has found that impaired driving remains a significant problem that needs to be addressed.

“Ohio traffic crash statistics show that there were over 17,000 alcohol-related crashes in 2005 and 477 of those crashes ended in death,” said Colonel Paul D. McClellan, superintendent of the Patrol. “These checkpoints are designed to not only deter impaired driving, but to proactively remove these dangerous drivers from our roadways.”

Because low-manpower checkpoints require fewer resources, the Patrol has been able to do multiple checkpoints every week in different areas, including areas where traditionally checkpoints were not done.

Comparing last year to this year as of Aug. 11, the Patrol conducted 30 traditional checkpoints in 2005, and 10 traditional and 58 low-manpower checkpoints this year. Last year’s arrests stemming from saturation patrols and checkpoints totaled 139, while this year’s totaled 289. (Typically arrests are not the barometer of checkpoint success because there should be fewer arrests once the public knows they’re out there and has an increased perception of being caught. Arrests indicate strong enforcement and send a strong message to the public: if you drive drunk, you will be arrested.)

The Ohio low-manpower checkpoints have been well-covered by the media, and one of the most important reasons checkpoints are effective is that they are highly publicized. The week of the checkpoint, the Patrol issues a statewide media release. The day before

the checkpoint, the county is announced, and the morning of the checkpoint, the exact location is announced.

In addition to informing motorists that impaired driving is not taken lightly, the Patrol stresses to the public that troopers at the checkpoints will have zero tolerance for safety belt and child safety seat violations.

When issuing press releases or being interviewed by the news media, a Patrol spokesperson reminds: "There are other options. If you are going to drink, designate a driver, get a cab or taxi, and make other travel arrangements. Don't let another life be lost for the senseless and selfish act of getting behind the wheel while you're impaired."

Initially, the first low-manpower checkpoints in Ohio were funded through grants from the Governor's Highway Safety Office. Traditional checkpoints use funding from federal overtime and OVI fine money.

Funding and personnel are, of course, not uncommon concerns in law enforcement. When conducting OVI checkpoints, the Patrol uses interagency cooperation to address these challenges.

"HAPPY HOUR" CHECKPOINTS

In Charleston, West Virginia, and other areas of the country, "happy hour" is bringing to mind more than drink specials. It's making people think about sobriety checkpoints and think twice about getting behind the wheel impaired.

Historically, checkpoints in West Virginia have been conducted between the hours of 9 p.m. and 3 a.m., or 10 p.m. and 4 a.m., says Sgt. Shawn Williams, highway safety director for the Charleston Police Department and a liaison officer with the state's Governor's Highway Safety Office.

"Drunk driving is a problem that unfortunately goes on throughout the day, not just in the evening hours," he says.

During Charleston's first happy hour checkpoint this summer, five drunk drivers were arrested between 4 and 8 p.m.

By having checkpoints late in the afternoon/early evening, Williams says, "You're able to educate different groups of people, from different age groups and different socio-economic classes. You're getting the whole spectrum of motorists from people getting off of work to people running errands."

Happy hour checkpoints can be large-scale or low-manpower. Charleston has used as few as six and as many as 15 officers. Because the checkpoints aren't done late at night or very early in the morning, agencies can pull from a different pool of officers including the day shift.

Checkpoints done earlier in the day also offer the benefit of daylight and higher visibility for the officers working the checkpoints.

A word of caution, Williams says, “With happy hour checkpoints, you have to be especially careful where you set them up.” During rush hour, some locations may not be suitable for checkpoints because they have too much traffic, too many cars passing through with motorists leaving work at the same time.

A FULL CALENDAR OF EVENTS

In 11 states, checkpoints are illegal, prohibited or not conducted. Washington is one of those states. To combat drunk driving, the Washington State Patrol (WSP) uses a full calendar of special emphasis programs, which were included in “Creating Impaired Driving General Deterrence: Eight Case Studies of Sustained, High-Visibility, Impaired-Driving Enforcement.” The report by Dr. Jack Stuster of Anacapa Sciences Inc. and sponsored by the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA) was released in March 2006.

Among WSP’s unique programs is El Protector, adapted from the California Highway Patrol and used in Yakima and Benton counties to educate Hispanic drivers, who are disproportionately represented in alcohol-related crashes. Essential to the program are Hispanic officers who serve as strong, caring role models eager to educate and protect fellow Hispanics. While various media are used to deliver a consistent meaningful message, organizers found the best way to reach their target audience was by providing education at workplaces. The program’s advisory committee developed a bilingual educational flyer (based on a concept from the California Highway Patrol’s SAFE program). Coloring books and bilingual program pamphlets also were created. Materials are handed out at traffic safety presentations at schools, community events, workplaces and during individual contacts with residents.

Also unique is WSP’s full-time DUI (driving under the influence) detachment. Currently one of eight WSP districts has a detachment; a second will be added before the winter holidays.

“As we are able to gain funding for additional troopers/sergeants, we will continue to expand,” says WSP Assistant Chief Brian Ursino.

The DUI squads are full-time and year-round. They are not the same as the holiday DUI teams, in all eight districts. Holiday teams consist of motorcycle troopers using cars in winter weather and regular troopers on overtime using federal traffic safety grant funding.

For use with various special emphasis patrols, WSP has a mobile impaired driving unit (MIDU) with three BAC machines, three computer workstations for writing reports, a dark room for DRE (drug recognition expert) evaluations and two prisoner holding cells. The unit was purchased from an RV dealer at cost, using federal traffic safety dollars, an

insurance company grant and donations. The MIDU significantly cuts DUI processing time, allowing officers to resume special emphasis patrol activities much quicker.

SUPER SATURATION PATROLS

While saturation patrols typically are enforcement efforts done individually by law enforcement agencies, the East Valley DUI Task Force in Maricopa County, Arizona, has shown the benefits of agencies working together. The mission of the task force is to reduce the number of serious/fatal vehicle collisions. The task force's "super saturation patrols" are included in NHTSA's eight case studies report, which points out NHTSA's 1993 guide for conducting saturation patrols is based largely on the experiences of agencies in this task force.

Super saturation patrols could be used at any time to observe moving violations of impaired drivers. East Valley has been using them during holidays or special events with a history of impaired driving problems.

Instead of using 15 to 20 officers from one agency, 15 to 20 officers from two to three agencies might work together. Or, a large super saturation patrol might involve more than 12 agencies and more than 100 officers. Concentrating that many officers in a specific geographical area creates high-visibility law enforcement.

"The public knows you're out there," says Lt. William Peters of the Mesa Police Department, who was a sergeant in Mesa's DUI unit when the report was written. "If they know we're out there, then hopefully they will not be willing to risk driving impaired and getting arrested."

When task forces are put together, there are many questions and a lot of research that needs to be done.

"There are jurisdictional issues, court issues, paper flow issues, chain of command issues, and of course politics," says Peters, who now oversees Mesa's support services division. "To start, there needs to be well-thought planning."

Once task forces are put into action, he says their work often becomes routine. But, he adds, large saturation patrols lasting 14 to 15 days and involving 100 or more officers still need to be planned well in advance.

An officer or commanding officer might wonder why should officers be assigned to work in another city.

"In most of these areas, you can cross from one city to another without really recognizing the difference," Peters says. "Impaired driving impacts all of us. If we can concentrate our manpower together, we can have a far greater impact for our citizens."

Benefits are realized in other ways as well.

“Our agencies work better together,” he says. “We’ve developed networking that you just don’t get any other way. Ultimately it impacts how we handle impaired drivers as a society in this area. When you combine this many officers together, you’re going to make a difference in a community.”

SUPPORT AND ENCOURAGEMENT

While agencies have been stepping up their efforts, MADD, along with the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), and NHTSA offer support and encouragement.

Many local law enforcement agencies don’t have the resources they need for a proactive traffic unit and some don’t prioritize drunk driving prevention and law enforcement, says Ursino, who chairs the IACP Impaired Driving Subcommittee, which includes MADD leaders.

That was the reason the IACP Impaired Driving Subcommittee drafted a resolution for a “renewed focus on impaired driving,” and it will be considered for adoption by the IACP Executive Board at the annual meeting (in October). A similar version resolution was passed at the National Sheriffs’ Association conference in June.

“It is the hope of the IACP Impaired Driving Subcommittee that these resolutions, coupled with the impaired driving guidebook we are publishing in conjunction with the IACP Highway Safety Committee Meeting (Oct. 15) will result in additional resources and focus being placed on this issue throughout North America,” Ursino says.

The guidebook will be available from the IACP Web site (www.theiacp.org) as well as MADD’s Web site and others.

MADD this year created www.madd.org/lawenforcement specifically to assist law enforcement officers and promote the sharing of ideas.

A forum on the site allows officers to discuss common concerns and discover new resources. For example, one officer asked about alcohol prevention curriculum for elementary students. Information on Protecting You/Protecting Me, developed by MADD in collaboration with the Hazelden Foundation, is available at www.pypm.org. It is the only research-based, model curriculum that teaches children in Grades 1-5 the impact of alcohol on the developing brain and how to protect themselves if riding in a vehicle with an alcohol-impaired driver.

The MADD law enforcement Web site also includes tributes to fallen officers, award information, best practices – and there’s information on boating under the influence, and public service announcements.

Much can be done and needs to be done to combat drunk driving. According to Ursino, “The biggest mistake an agency can make is to remain on the sideline and not get in the fight.”

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This project was supported by Grant No. 2005-DD-BX-K162 awarded by the Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Alcohol prevention for elementary students.

www.pypm.org

Mothers Against Drunk Driving

www.madd.org/lawenforcement

Impaired Driving Division at National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

www.stopimpaireddriving.org

Low-manpower checkpoints in small communities

www.lifesaversconference.org/webfiles2006/tipton4.pdf