News and Notes From New Mexico

The Comprehensive Impaired Driving Project

This is the first of a series of electronic newsletters focusing on activities conducted as part of the comprehensive impaired driving demonstration project underway in New Mexico. The project is scheduled to be completed in March 2009, but the project team and NHTSA believe that some activities can be shared now instead of waiting until the project is completed. Please keep in mind that most of the individual activities discussed here have not been fully evaluated but appear to have had an effect in reducing alcohol-related traffic fatalities in New Mexico.

This issue focuses on program objectives and background, and features two law enforcement articles prepared by the officers who are on the front lines of this project. The first article presents information on how the Bernalillo County Sheriff's Office uses a transport vehicle in conjunction with a breath alcohol testing vehicle (BATmobile) to expedite the arrest and booking process associated with sobriety checkpoints and saturation patrols. The second feature discusses how the McKinley County Sheriff's Office employs "inactive" checkpoints along with saturation patrols to maximize high visibility enforcement opportunities in a rural county.

Future issues will feature other components of the project and how those components affect impaired driving in New Mexico. We anticipate releasing a newsletter every three months. The next issue will feature the State cabinet-level position of DWI Coordinator, the Project Lead, and the DWI Leadership Team. But first, let's take a look at the project from the beginning and then turn to some exciting enforcement strategies.

Project Background.

NHTSA's FY 04 appropriations included $3 million to pilot-test a comprehensive impaired driving demonstration program. Through a competitive process, NHTSA awarded a cooperative agreement to the New Mexico Department of Transportation Traffic Safety Bureau (TSB) to test a model that allows for the development of a comprehensive program. At the same time, NHTSA awarded, through a competitive process, a contract to the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation to independently evaluate the project.
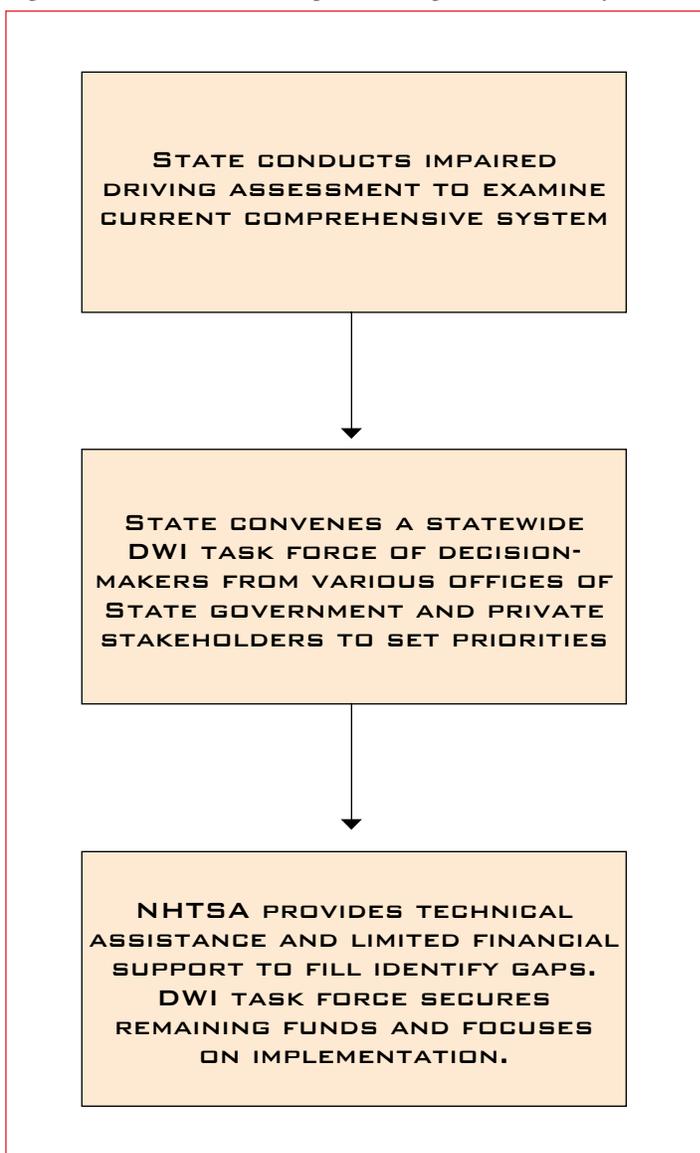
The project has two goals:

1. Demonstrate a process for implementing a comprehensive impaired driving reduction system, and

2. Demonstrate the impact of the comprehensive system on DWI crashes, injuries, and fatalities.

The project objective is to develop a process that is transferable to other States with high numbers or rates of alcohol-related fatalities.

The approach that New Mexico is using to implement a comprehensive program makes use of a State DWI task force with representation from across State government, the ability to identify problems, and the authority to implement activities and programs to address those problems.

Figure 1. NHTSA's New Mexico Impaired Driving Demonstration Project Model

State conducts impaired driving assessment to examine current comprehensive system

State convenes a statewide DWI task force of decision-makers from various offices of State government and private stakeholders to set priorities

NHTSA provides technical assistance and limited financial support to fill identify gaps. DWI task force secures remaining funds and focuses on implementation.

To implement this project, NHTSA and TSB decided to conduct activities in two phases. The first phase, which lasted a little over a year, focused on several key program needs including law enforcement activities and better coordination of communication activities. The second phase focused on the DWI Leadership Team (New Mexico's DWI task force) to help facilitate system analysis and gap identification.

TSB identified a need for enhanced impaired driving enforcement in five of the six counties with the highest number of alcohol-related fatalities. These counties are Bernalillo, Dona Ana, McKinley, San Juan, and Rio Arriba. The sixth county, Santa Fe County, initially served as a control county for evaluation purposes.

In each of the five counties, two deputy sheriffs were hired to conduct enhanced impaired driving enforcement activities. In 2007, the State added funds for two additional officers (totaling four in each county) and added the Santa Fe County Sheriff's Office and the Navajo Nation to the program. The counties' "mini-DWI units" provided flexibility and allowed the counties to try a variety of impaired driving enforcement strategies and activities. By October 2005, the five original counties were operating on a full-time basis.

In addition to the enhanced enforcement activities, the first phase addressed improving and coordinating the media and publicity effort with enforcement activities. NHTSA and TSB staff collaborated to develop a comprehensive communication plan and a year-long calendar that allowed for improved planning and implementation of communication activities. To further support law enforcement activities at the local level, TSB contracted with the DWI Resource Center to place community outreach staff in the five original counties to increase visibility and publicity relating to enhanced impaired driving enforcement in individual communities and neighborhoods.

During the second phase, the project team devoted time to getting the DWI Leadership Team established; the DWI Coordinator and the Director of the Traffic Safety Bureau chair this team. Once established, the DWI Leadership Team began the process of identifying gaps within the State's overall multi-agency approach to reducing impaired driving by using the New Mexico Multi-Agency DWI Strategy Plan as a roadmap. The Plan was created in December 2003 by the Governor's Statewide Multi-Agency DWI Strategic Planning team.

Featured Articles

The early stages of this project focused primarily on creating enhanced enforcement in five counties with a high number of alcohol-related traffic fatalities. In Bernalillo County, Sergeant Angel Torres leads the DWI enforcement unit for the Sheriff's Office. In addition to the four officers assigned to this unit, Bernalillo County contributed three additional officers to the unit. With this large DWI-dedicated unit, Bernalillo

County has the capability to conduct special DWI activities in different parts of the county simultaneously. To support the officers and to get them back on the street sooner, Sergeant Torres developed a booking and transport system that reduces the amount of time a line officer spends processing an impaired driver. He discusses this system below.

On the other end of the manpower spectrum is the McKinley County Sheriff's Office. In this rural county, manpower limitations make it difficult to conduct specialized DWI enforcement activities. To address this problem, Sergeant Tom Mumford enthusiastically added "inactive" sobriety checkpoints to the agency's list of DWI enforcement strategies. In the article entitled "Inactive Sobriety Checkpoints" Sergeant Mumford discusses how his department is using inactive checkpoints and some of the anecdotal results of the DWI unit's efforts.

Transport Vehicles Increase DWI Operations Efficiency

By Sgt. Angel Torres
Bernalillo County Sheriffs Department
New Mexico Impaired Driving Demonstration Project

The Bernalillo County Sheriff's Department often uses special transport vehicles to help patrol officers to work more efficiently and effectively at special events such as DWI checkpoints, saturation patrols, and warrant roundup operations.

Our DWI unit has two transport vehicles which are ¾ ton passenger vans with prisoner transport inserts that can hold

up to 12 detainees. The units have three compartments to separate males from females or to secure disorderly individuals.

Transport vehicles are typically used in conjunction with our BATmobile (breath alcohol testing mobile unit) operations. Special transport officers, along with our BATofficer, assigned to man the BATmobile and serve as backup key operators support patrol officers by booking prisoners into the BATmobile.

While the arresting patrol officer completes the required paperwork in an office-like setting within the BATmobile, the support officers search, inventory, and seal prisoners' property, and secure prisoners in the BATmobile's holding cell. With paperwork completed, the arresting officer is relieved of responsibility for the prisoner and returns to service at the checkpoint or on patrol.

The process continues until the holding cell in the BATmobile is full, usually with 8 to 10 prisoners. Transport and BATmobile officers then verify all prisoners to be transported via a prisoner log, load the transport vehicle, and bring the prisoners to the Albuquerque Metro Detention Center for final booking.

For the Bernalillo County Sheriff's Department, this prisoner transport procedure has proven effective. Patrol officers do not lose valuable patrol time driving to and from detention facilities. In addition, officers save even more time as transport officers assume the responsibility of waiting in line at the detention facility to book their prisoners.

Using this system, an experienced officer can make first contact with a driver suspected of DWI, administer field sobriety tests, make the arrest, and complete the booking process in less than 45 minutes. The officer is then back on the checkpoint line or returns to patrol activity to remove more drunk drivers from the road.

Inactive Sobriety Checkpoints Valuable Deterrence Tools in a DWI Arsenal

By Sgt. Tom Mumford
McKinley County Sheriffs Department
New Mexico Impaired Driving Demonstration Project

Sobriety checkpoints are without doubt effective in reducing drunk driving. In fact, many law enforcement agencies have been successful in not only reducing and deterring impaired driving, but also in arresting drivers for violations ranging from vehicle registration, lack of proof of insurance, and driving on suspended licenses to outstanding warrants and other serious crimes including kidnapping.

To ensure the preservation of civil and legal rights for citizen drivers, State and local regulations often stipulate specific checkpoint procedures. As law enforcement agencies, we must adhere closely to the laws governing checkpoints and still do our best to find intoxicated drivers, many who know well how to evade our efforts. However, in an effort to stay one step ahead of the ever-growing number of people who drive intoxicated, the McKinley County Sheriff's Department has used an innovative enforcement tool to great success – the inactive checkpoint.

What is an inactive checkpoint? Simply put, it is a checkpoint scene set up in all its glory with signs, traffic cones, and flares on the roadway, yet no officers are actually within the designated area and no officers approach or stop drivers. We conduct these inactive checkpoints either on a scheduled basis or on the spur of the moment and keep the necessary equipment stored in the vehicle trunks of three DWI enforcement units.

When approaching an inactive checkpoint, drivers typically slow down, look for a signal or an officer, and then continue driving through the area. However, some drivers try to actively avoid what they perceive to be a DWI checkpoint by making an illegal U-turn or other illegal driving maneuver. A single officer stationed nearby can make traffic stops as appropriate for these violations. Not surprisingly, upon apprehension, these violators

typically are driving impaired, on restricted or revoked licenses, or have outstanding warrants.

We regard inactive checkpoints as a DWI deterrent and high visibility enforcement tool, part of the mix of anti-DWI prevention techniques for our agency to use.

Rules of targeting liquor establishments with active checkpoints must be followed; however, we have successfully set up an inactive checkpoint right down the road from a bar. In fact, during a recent inactive checkpoint effort held at closing time for a local bar, we could plainly see departing bar patrons line up at a pay phone waiting to call for a ride home. One by one, we heard callers say, "Can you come get me? The police are checking for DWI. I've been drinking and can't drive." There is no doubt that our county and surrounding areas were safer that evening with fewer drunk drivers on local roadways.

Inactive checkpoints can be set up by two officers within a very short time and dismantled even more quickly, enabling officers to relocate the action around the community. When we conduct this activity vigorously, sometimes moving sites on almost an hourly basis, the public perceives intense and aggressive DWI enforcement efforts.

 In McKinley County, New Mexico, we are committed to reducing drunk driving and associated alcohol-related crashes, injuries, and fatalities. By using a combination of active and inactive checkpoints, especially when combined with saturization patrols, we see more potential drunk drivers making decisions to take cabs, designate drivers, or simply stay at home. And we're all safer because of these deterrence actions.