

Zero-Tolerance Driving Initiative

Background & Fact Sheet

Starting this fall in Morgantown, a high-visibility enforcement and publicity campaign will be used to enforce drinking-and-driving laws. This effort will involve a variety of enforcement tactics, novel technology, and supported research. The Morgantown area is at the forefront of a national initiative to study drinking and driving in college towns.

Alcohol-Related Fatalities in Underage Persons

Since changing the minimum legal drinking age from 18 to 21, decreasing the legal driving blood alcohol concentration (BAC) from .10 to .08, and establishing zero-tolerance laws, alcohol-related driving fatalities have decreased significantly.¹

Yet, motor-vehicle crashes remain one of the leading causes of death for youth and young adults aged 16 to 24. Many of these fatal crashes involve alcohol.²

Young males at BACs as low as .02 to .05 are nearly five times more likely to be involved in a motor-vehicle crash, and young women at comparable alcohol levels are nearly 300% as likely as sober drivers to be involved in a crash.³

Without effective measures to reduce underage drunk driving, teen traffic deaths are expected to increase as the population increases.

About the Zero-Tolerance Laws

All 50 states and the District of Columbia enforce Zero-Tolerance Laws. These laws make it illegal for an individual younger than age 21 to operate a vehicle with any measureable amount of alcohol in their system (BAC \geq .02).²

The penalties for violating the Zero-Tolerance Law while driving include arrest, a fine, suspension of driver's license, and a misdemeanor conviction. The conviction can only be expunged by successfully completing the West Virginia Motor Vehicle Test and Lock ignition interlock program.⁴

Morgantown Specific Underage Drinking Issues

During 2009, close to 20 traffic fatalities and more than 900 nonfatal traffic injuries were attributed to driving after underage drinking.⁵

In 2010, underage drinking cost West Virginians \$400 million in medical, work lost, and pain and suffering costs.^{5,6}

In 2012, *The Princeton Review* ranked West Virginia University as the No. 1 party school for the third time in the past decade.⁷

Sobriety Checkpoints

Sobriety or DUI checkpoints are a law-enforcement tool to encourage sobriety of drivers in a predetermined location on a given night.

If impairment of a driver is detected, police officers use field sobriety tests or preliminary breath tests to determine if citations or arrests should be made.

Sobriety checkpoints, along with publicity of enforcement, are a vital component of the “high-visibility enforcement” concept. Checkpoints have been proven as an effective strategy to deter drinking and driving.⁸

Publicity about the Morgantown campaign reminds the community that apprehension from drinking and driving may be imminent.

Passive Alcohol Sensors

Police officers staffing the local sobriety checkpoints in the Morgantown area will be equipped with passive alcohol sensors (PAS) built into their flashlights.

The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, in several research studies, concluded that passive alcohol sensors significantly increase the detection of impaired drivers at sobriety checkpoints.³

The sensors work by discretely sampling ambient air surrounding an individual’s face as he or she speaks. The PAS provides a qualitative measure of the level of alcohol in the breath, then processes the air and immediately alerts the police officer to the presence of alcohol. Thus, when a driver is pulled over, the PAS can assist the officer in detecting those who demonstrate few overt signs of impairment but may still be impaired—even at relatively low BACs.⁹

The results from the sensors are not permissible as evidence in court and do not replace field sobriety tests or evidentiary BAC tests. Rather, the sensors are designed to enhance an officer’s ability to determine (sniff out) whether additional tests are warranted.

Several studies by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety and other organizations have proven the effectiveness of passive sensors. They have also found that the tool significantly aids in removing drunk drivers from roadways that would otherwise not be detected, possibly until a crash.¹⁰



The Zero-Tolerance Driving Initiative at Two Colleges

In 2009, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) awarded a five-year grant to the Pacific Institute of Research and Evaluation (PIRE) of Calverton, Maryland, to study drinking and driving in college towns. The research will evaluate the enhanced drinking-and-driving enforcement programs at State College, Pennsylvania (Penn State), and Morgantown, West Virginia (WVU).

Mark Johnson (PIRE) is the principle investigator for the study. Rob Turrisi (Penn State) and Keith Zullig (WVU) serve as head of research activities at their respective locations. The project brings an opportunity to educate and gain community support, including that of students, by advertising that the legal BAC levels for adults are not the same as they are for those younger than 21.

Researchers have obtained baseline data, are coordinating the enforcement and publicity intervention, and will obtain follow-up data to determine the effectiveness of the efforts. Driver and pedestrian surveys, along with anonymous BAC measurements of randomly selected and voluntary participants, will be used to compile data. Survey questions pertain to assessing perceived risk of drinking and driving, awareness of enforcement, and prevalence of drinking and driving in the community.

By the end of the Zero-Tolerance study, approximately 6,400 roadside surveys, 4,800 pedestrian surveys, and 2,400 Web surveys will be collected, analyzed, and used to develop future interventions for underage drinking and driving. Measures of effectiveness of the intervention will include decreases in DUI offenses, decreases in alcohol-related vehicle crashes, an increase in knowledge about the existence of Zero-Tolerance Laws, and increases in perceived risk of arrest among community members.

