

NEWS RELEASE

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KDOT Event Highlights Drunk Driving's Toll and Law Enforcement's Response

Major enforcement effort seeks to save lives

TOPEKA, Kan. – Kansas law enforcement takes impaired driving very seriously because of the unacceptable toll it takes on lives and property. At a recent event in Topeka, professionals from the fields of law enforcement, corrections and emergency trauma gathered to discuss and illustrate just how severe that toll really is.

In 2007 alone there were 118 alcohol-related fatalities, 3,292 alcohol-related crashes and 1,944 alcohol-related injuries throughout the state. But statistics alone don't convey the emotional impact of what a drunk driving crash and/or arrest can have on an individual. That's why professionals gathered at the Shawnee County Adult Detention Center Aug. 8 for a media event designed to bring attention to the consequences of impaired driving. That date, 08-08-08, was chosen to emphasize the .08 BAC impaired driving law.

Participants included Karen Wittman, the state's new traffic safety resource prosecutor; Dr. James Lasseter, an emergency room physician at St. Francis Health Center in Topeka; and Capt. Timothy B. Phelps of the Shawnee County Department of Corrections. Wittman discussed tough new penalties that put drunk drivers behind bars. Phelps led a tour of the Adult Detention Center, demonstrating the booking process for arrested drunk drivers. Dr. Lasseter discussed his experiences treating disabling injuries suffered by drunk drivers and their victims.

In addition to providing a sobering lesson on the toll impaired driving takes on individuals, the event was also designed to call attention to a major impaired-driving enforcement effort now underway. Law enforcement agencies across Kansas have teamed up with thousands of other law enforcement and traffic safety agencies across the nation from Aug. 14 through the Labor Day holiday to take part in the "Drunk driving. Over the limit. Under arrest." crackdown on impaired driving. The national campaign is organized by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and focuses on combining high-visibility enforcement with heightened public awareness efforts. It is designed to put all drivers on notice, if they are driving drunk, they will be arrested.

Wittman's role as the Kansas traffic safety resource prosecutor is to be a resource for all prosecutors and law enforcement personnel statewide, providing immediate access to specialized information and resources needed for traffic and DUI prosecutions. For example, she pointed out, a BAC of .08 or higher is not the only way to be convicted of impaired driving.

"To be convicted of a DUI in Kansas, there are three different ways," Wittman explained. "You can be over the limit of .08. Secondly, you can be under the influence of drugs which impairs your ability to drive. Lastly, it can be a combination of drugs and alcohol that causes you to drive in an unsafe manner"

As for the penalty, Wittman said, "In Kansas it is no longer a question of if you will go to jail, but for how long."

During the tour of the intake process at the jail, Phelps discussed how dehumanizing and demoralizing the intake process can be for drunk drivers, who often are people who do not consider themselves criminals and never imagined themselves going to jail. It is common, he said, for new inmates jailed on impaired driving convictions to be placed on suicide watch.

Dr. Lasseter pointed out people injured in crashes who are suspected of being drunk are not given pain-killing medications, because that can interfere with efforts to diagnose potential brain injuries. Typically, patients go through a process he described as "amazingly uncomfortable" without pain medication, including insertion of tubes through the nose and into the stomach; large IV needles; and a catheter tube to drain the bladder.

Wittman's advice to avoid such a fate: "Don't drink and drive. Just don't do it. Violators face jail time, the loss of their driver's license, higher insurance rates, and dozens of other expenses from attorney fees, other fines and court costs, car towing and repairs. Plus, offenders risk added embarrassment, humiliation and other potential losses and consequences after informing family, friends and employers."

For more information, visit www.StopImpairedDriving.org.

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