

Chronic drunk drivers like 'bomb with a lit fuse'

By Carol Bryant

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Central Nebraska is a hotbed of driving and drinking.

Hall, Buffalo and Dawson counties "per population have the highest number of alcohol-involved crashes in the state," said Lt. Leon Cederlind of the Nebraska State Patrol in Grand Island.

He distinguishes between crashes and accidents.

"An accident is something you can't do much about, such as a deer going in front of your car," he said. "When you sit at a bar all evening, get polluted, then go out and drive, that's a crash."

"That's the frustrating thing about drivers like this. They're like a bomb with a lit fuse. They refuse to recognize the problem and continue to drink and drive," he said.

Nebraska Crime Commission statistics show 832 driving under the influence (DUI) arrests in Hall County in 1993. That compares with 136 arrests in Adams County, 413 in Buffalo County, 3,695 in Douglas County, 1,425 in Lancaster County and 735 in Sarpy County.

Other local statistics help tell the story.

The number of drunk driving charges filed in Hall County has dropped gradually from 1,041 in 1990 to three-fourths as many last year. But County Attorney Ellen Totzke said the pace picked up in 1994, with 839 charges filed as of two weeks ago.

Hall County Judge David Bush said the number of DUI offenders caught in the county is due to the "aggressive stand" taken by law enforcement officers.

"I don't think we have a disproportionate number of drunk drivers," Bush said. "Law enforcement is just doing a good job."

That job includes extra efforts that focus on arresting drunk drivers and especially target frequent offenders.

The State Patrol has two programs aimed at DUI enforcement:

The Multiple DUI Offender program targets residents of nine counties, including Hall County, who have suspended licenses and four or more DUI convictions.

The extra enforcement program allows officers to work overtime "for the purpose of watching for impaired drivers," Cederlind said.

The Hall County multiple offender list is updated every three months and distributed to local law enforcement agencies. If a person on the list is arrested for driving during suspension, the patrol notifies the suspending court. That allows each judge to impose the more severe penalties that apply if a condition of the sentence or probation has been violated, he said.

Lt. Rick Reitz, commander of the patrol's research and planning office in Lincoln, said the nine counties were selected for special enforcement efforts because they represented a range of populations and they had higher percentages of DUI offenders. The program began in Hall, Scotts Bluff and Dakota counties in October 1992. Other counties added since then are Madison, Lancaster, Dawson, Douglas, Thurston and Lincoln.

As of Sept. 30, Hall County had 132 residents with four or more DUI convictions and their licenses currently suspended. Among those 132 are two men with eight offenses each.

New offenders receive letters stating that the maximum penalty for driving on a suspended license is five years in prison and a \$10,000 fine. The letter also recommends treatment for an alcohol or drug problem, Cederlind said, and refers to the toll-free Drug and Alcohol Information Line, (800) 648-4444.

"We want them to get alcohol problems taken care of so they can get back into productive society," Cederlind said.

Bush said even if a person's license is suspended, that may not keep him from driving. Bush said he doesn't have an answer for that.

"It's a hard problem to deal with," he said. The driver can be put in jail, but eventually he will be released.

The Nebraska Department of Highway Safety funds both the multiple offender program and the patrol's overtime extra enforcement program. Cederlind said officers "who have shown abilities to recognize, apprehend and convict" drunk drivers may ask to work overtime. Peak times are 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. Friday and Saturday nights.

Grand Island Police Chief Gene Watson said his department also has been awarded a \$39,676 grant for additional DUI enforcement. The grant will pay for 90 percent of the cost of a new police car and 90 percent of the salary of an officer.

Watson said the purpose of the Grand Island effort is to increase the number of DUI arrests and to increase public awareness about the dangers of drinking and driving.

The new police car will be specially marked so it is recognized for enforcing DUI laws. The officer will be on duty during evening hours when more drunk driving occurs and will focus on making DUI arrests. He said an experienced officer will be assigned to the project, and a new officer will be hired to take over his previous position.