



JUNE 2013 NEWSLETTER

A Comprehensive Approach To Reducing Alcohol Impaired Driving By Pamela Erickson

Everyone has a stake in reducing the large number of people who die or are injured on our highways due to alcohol involved crashes. Almost 10,000 people die every single year from drunk driving. This is far more than the 6,700 total deaths we have suffered in the two recent wars. But, to achieve any kind of significant reduction, we must work together with passion and dedication. My fear is that arguing over the value of a single measure will deter progress that can clearly be made on all the aspects of this issue.

Here's the background:

In May of this year, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) recommended that we drop the Blood Alcohol Content assumption for alcohol impaired driving from .08 to .05. They cite the fact that there were 9,878 alcohol-related traffic deaths in 2011 and that progress on DUI has plateaued since the mid 1990's. To be clear, the number of deaths due to alcohol related crashes has continued to decline, but the percentage of all traffic deaths due to alcohol has remained around 31% since the mid 1990's.

There was an immediate negative reaction to this idea in the media. The general concern

expressed was that it would "criminalize" moderate drinkers. That is because a small person, particularly a female, could reach the .05 level within an hour after just one or two drinks.

The Transportation Board issued a lengthy report on the subject with several pages of recommendations. Unfortunately, only the recommendation about lowering the BAC got media attention.

Let me highlight some of the elements of a comprehensive approach:

Better enforcement: A recent report by Pat Gagliardi, a former Michigan legislator and liquor commissioner, documents the fact that our nation has fewer liquor enforcement agents. Without adequate enforcement, laws against serving and selling alcohol to minors and intoxicated people will not be enforced as they should. Virtually, every local government suffered loss of revenue during the recession and many enforcement agencies had to ensure budget cuts. This means they simply may not in a position to conduct the kinds of high visibility patrols the NTSB recommends. Additional resources are clearly needed to adequately enforce our DUI and liquor laws.

Better, more affordable, technology: Today there are amazing devices in a wrist-band that can monitor your fitness and health (fat burning, blood oxygen level, heart rate, etc.). Yet technology is lagging for monitoring Blood Alcohol Content. Ignition interlocks do prevent drunk driving, but they are expensive and those offenders without the means will elect not to drive or to drive with a suspended license. The NTSB recommends the use of passive alcohol sensing technology to improve the effectiveness of enforcement patrols. But, these are also expensive. We need investment in development of these technological aids and we need to find a way to make them more affordable.

Better labeling and customer information: We could do a better job to facilitate moderate drinking habits that keep people safe and healthy. It is actually difficult for someone to monitor their own alcohol consumption. First, we have no labeling requirements that tell the consumer how much alcohol is in the container as it relates to the standard drink equivalent. While beer has traditionally been sold in single serving sizes somewhat equivalent to a standard drink, wine and spirits are sold in much larger bottles. For those products, whether you have a “standard drink” depends on how much you pour. It makes no sense to require content labeling for food products, but not alcohol. People need to know the standard-drink equivalent contained in the alcohol products they buy. Ironically, the Tax and Trade Bureau recently allowed “voluntary” labeling. (There are some label requirements for alcohol content, but they are not required for all products.) Second, it is even more difficult to judge one’s impairment level. BAC varies significantly depending on the person’s sex, weight, food consumed, and other factors. So, without some type of accurate measuring device, the best you can do is a ballpark guess.

Better serving practices: It always surprises me when I see a bar that actively encourages intoxication. As a regulator, I found that most licensees didn’t like competing with those kinds of places. A licensee risks loss of their license when they regularly over-serve patrons. We could do more to reward responsible retailing practices. Licensees with a good record could be granted a reduction in their license fee or qualify for a multi-year license. A local community or regulatory agency could develop rewards and incentives for good practices.

Limit availability: The Centers for Disease Control’s Community Prevention Task Force has made strong recommendations against increasing the number of alcohol outlets as well as the days and hours of sale. These recommendations are based on an independent review of research that shows increased availability of alcohol is associated with increased social problems. Yet, several states are considering later bar closing hours as a way to increase business and bump up sales tax collections. Other states have loosened controls on availability so that more places of all types can sell more alcohol. Of course, to gain more revenue, people have to buy and drink more which, in turn, leads to increased problems.

Improved sanctions: While incarcerating DUI offenders keeps them off the road, it is a very expensive sanction. And, a driver’s license suspension does not necessarily work well because 50-75% continue to drive with, according to Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD). The NTSB recommends using DWI courts or other programs to reduce recidivism. This may be a more cost-effective approach. Many of those arrested for DUI are young adults who are just starting in life. A DUI can be a major set-back and the beginning of a downward spiral. They may

lose their job and have difficulty finding another. They may need treatment for addiction or abuse, but cannot pay for it. Families counting on support will suffer. DUI courts sanction the offender, but also help the individual get their life back on track.

Cooperation and commitment to reduce impaired driving by industry members, enforcement, public health and citizens:

NTSB recommends that we establish measurable goals to reduce impaired driving and that we track progress. This should be done with the involvement and cooperation of all involved, including public health, enforcement, and industry members. This issue is way too important to waste time with arguments and sound bites. It's time to work together.



“Please use door at rear of building.”

The site of a recent DUI in Portland, Oregon involving two drunk drivers, one death, serious injuries and substantial property damage.

For more information, see www.healthyalcoholmarket.com
Contact Pam Erickson at pam@pamaction.com