



Examining New Mexico's Comprehensive Impaired Driving Program

For many years, New Mexico had one of the highest rates of alcohol-related driving fatalities in the United States. In 2004, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration entered into a cooperative agreement with the New Mexico Department of Transportation. The objective was to demonstrate a process for developing and implementing an enhanced comprehensive impaired driving program, to reduce the number of crashes and fatalities caused by impaired driving. NHTSA contracted with the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation (PIRE) to examine New Mexico's efforts.

New Mexico's Program

New Mexico had already completed a critical review of their State's program, and had developed a strategic plan for moving toward change. The Governor at the time, Bill Richardson, felt strongly about the harm to the State's residents from impaired driving crashes, and had made reducing DWI crashes one of his top priorities. He appointed a cabinet-level "DWI Czar" to work with the State agencies to help them work cooperatively and to marshal their resources to combat this issue. Once the project with NHTSA began, New Mexico implemented several other key initiatives, including:

- **The DWI Leadership Team** – Members included leaders from many State agencies, and non-governmental organizations. The team met on a regular basis to learn of each other's efforts, to prioritize State programs, and work together on new initiatives.
- **DWI Law Enforcement** – New Mexico focused its increased law enforcement efforts in its five (later, six) counties with the highest number of impaired driving fatalities. These counties, Bernalillo, Doña Ana, McKinley, Rio Arriba, and San Juan, (and later Santa Fe) each hired two additional officers dedicated to DWI enforcement. The officers focused on creating high-visibility enforcement, such as through sobriety checkpoints, to increase the detection and apprehension of impaired drivers. McKinley County developed a pizza-delivery-type sign that fit on top of the police vehicle. When someone was arrested for impaired driving, the sign flashed *Another Drunk Driver Busted* as

the vehicle was towed through highly populated areas on the way to the impound lot. Law enforcement agencies often worked together, especially during New Mexico's *Superblitz* and *100 Days and Nights of Summer* campaigns.

- **Two counties each purchased a BAT Mobile (breath alcohol testing mobile facility)** – a "law enforcement office on wheels." These allowed for onsite breath testing and post-arrest processing and booking of impaired drivers. These were especially beneficial during sobriety checkpoints and in rural areas, as they allowed quick processing of offenders, without officers needing to transport them to jail facilities.
- **Prosecution** – New Mexico hired a traffic safety resource prosecutor. This person focused on increasing prosecutors' knowledge of impaired driving issues, by offering training and serving as a resource on DWI cases. The San Juan County Sheriff's Office had a prosecutor based in its office. Deputies reported that the prosecutor's efforts not only cut down on court time for officers but also saved funds and improved conviction rates in the county.
- **Public Awareness** – One of the most effective ways of reducing impaired driving is through general deterrence. This model relies on the public's awareness of strong DWI enforcement, so that drinkers will refrain from driving after drinking. New Mexico worked to increase the amount of paid advertising of its enforcement campaigns, such as *Drunk Driving: Over the Limit. Under Arrest*, as well as earned media coverage.
- **DrunkBusters Hotline** – New Mexico initiated a toll-free hotline for the public to immediately report impaired drivers to law enforcement.
- **Mobile Strike Team** – This specialized enforcement unit addresses alcohol sales to minors, underage alcohol consumption, and sales to intoxicated persons. In 2006, New Mexico adopted the *Three Strikes* rule, under which licensing revocation actions were taken against liquor establishments found guilty of three violations within one year for over-serving intoxicated people or selling alcohol to underage customers.

Results

The table below shows the number of alcohol-involved crash fatalities from 2004 to 2009 in New Mexico. These were in crashes involving drivers or nonoccupants (e.g., pedestrians) with blood alcohol concentrations (BACs) of .01 grams per deciliter (g/dL) or higher. The illegal per se level in all States is .08 g/dL. The number of alcohol-involved (.01+ g/dL) fatalities and fatalities at higher BACs of .08+ decreased after New Mexico began its comprehensive program in 2005.

Table 1. Alcohol-Involved Crash Fatalities by BAC, 2004–2009

	Total Fatalities	Alcohol-Involved Fatalities		Fatalities at BAC= .01-.07		Fatalities at BAC= .08+	
2004	521	181	35%	25	5%	157	30%
2005	488	166	34%	17	3%	149	31%
2006	484	156	32%	20	4%	136	28%
2007	413	151	37%	19	5%	132	32%
2008	366	117	32%	12	3%	105	29%
2009	361	128	35%	16	4%	112	31%

Source: NHTSA's Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS – Oct 2013 version)

Other States also saw decreases in alcohol-involved fatalities during these years. Thus, factors outside of New Mexico's efforts (e.g., fewer miles driven) might have contributed to the reduction in fatalities. However, in 2004, New Mexico had the seventh highest alcohol-involved crash fatality rate in the country. By 2009, New Mexico's alcohol-involved crash fatality rate had dropped to 19th. Overall, New Mexico's multifaceted efforts appeared to have benefited the State.

Lessons Learned

During the course of the project, PIRE met with leadership team members, law enforcement officers, and prosecutors to learn about New Mexico's efforts. Among the information PIRE learned was:

- *Strong leadership is essential* – Governor Richardson signaled his commitment to addressing the impaired driving issue when he created the DWI Czar position.
- *Cross-cutting State coordination is important* – The DWI Leadership Team was the communication center for all impaired driving projects and issues in New Mexico. Although many agencies worked on alcohol-impaired driving issues, they were no longer working in isolation, duplicating services, or competing for scarce resources. The DWI Leadership Team created a forum to inform others of initiatives and to foster coordination.
- *Agreements and contracts take time to implement* – Planning is often a slow, steady process, and achieving agreement among various agencies or contracting to hire services can take time to implement, especially at the local/county level. Agencies must be realistic about when projects can start.
- *New devices are highly valued and appreciated, especially in rural areas* – The sheriffs' offices in rural areas were willing to try new devices to aid them in their alcohol-impaired driving operations. These devices included digital video flashlights and innovative vehicle signage. The BAT Mobiles were highly prized, and they encouraged law enforcement participation in special operations.
- *Collaboration is a key component to enforcement operations* – Law enforcement agencies valued the assistance of other agencies and non-law enforcement groups as they undertook enforcement campaigns.

How to Order

To order *New Mexico's Comprehensive Impaired Driving Program: A Case Study*; or *New Mexico's Comprehensive Impaired Driving Program: Crash Data Analysis*, write to the Office of Behavioral Safety Research, NHTSA, NTI-130, 1200 New Jersey Avenue SE., Washington, DC, 20590, fax to 202-366-7394, or download from www.nhtsa.gov. Amy Berning was the contract manager for this project.



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