Officials try to rally community support for fight on drunk driving
GRAV - Blasting a south Louisiana "Marijuaana..." mentality that heColorfully toured a supermarket... led a... cage on a "--g... campaign, part of an anti-drink... driving initiative launched last year.

"Alcohol and driving in Louisiana..." epidemic," said James R. Cham... y, a retired State Police colonel... and executive director of the Louisiana Highway Safety Commission, "is a public health crisis..."

Champagne joined Terrebonne's District Attorney Joe Walz Jr., Sheriff... lld Jerry Larquette, school Super... tendent Ed Richard Jr. and a host of... of the district attorney's office... The... cial event, which fe... ured lauded speeches from loc... al leaders, was to court community... support for a state-wide crackdown... on drunk driving began in earnest last year..."... the implementation of a special court designed to handle drunk driving..."

The... program is partly paid for through a $500,000 grant from the Louisiana Highway Safety Commission, with the parish providing matching money.

TRUNKLINE STATISTICS

About 2,000 people were arrested... for drunk driving in Louisiana last year, Champagne said. Of that number, 1,600 are in the southern part... the state.

According to state highway data, 100 people were injured in alcohol-related crashes on Terrebonne roads in 2003. The drunk-driving wickets... claimed 1 life that year in the parish.

A total of 42 people were killed in crashes if DWI in Troop C's patrol area, which... includes Assumption, Terrebonne, Lafourche and parts of St. James and St. John the Baptist parishes. That number climbed to 62 in 2005.

Though poor roads contribute to crashes, the high numbers of wrecks... mainly illustrate troubling truths about Louisiana motorists, Cham...agne said.

"We're abnormal drivers," said Champagne, a former... told. "We have terrible driving behaviors."

A culture that is generally permissi... when it comes to drinking and... driving exacerbates the problem.

In 2003, almost half of Louisiana's crashes... alcohol related, according... in a report released by the National Highway Traffic Safety Ad... ministration.

"We have the second-worst record... in the entire country," Champagne said.

He backed the efforts of local... to curb drunk driving, adding that he hopes Terrebonne's program served as... for the rest of the state.

"We're going to stop drinking... driving in this state because we have to do it," Champagne said.

DUI COURT

Though her checks for underage... increased DWI check... points are also part of the "Don't be a Zero... campaign, the parish's DWI... court - the first of its kind in... Louisiana - is the other cornerstone.

Indeed after the Terrebonne... court launched in 2003, the DWI Court... to treat and rehab... second-offense drunk drivers.
**Officials rally community against drunken driving**

**ROBERT ZULLO**
Staff Writer

GRAY - Blasting a south Louisiana "Mardi Gras" that has traditionally turned a permissive eye to drinking and driving, a state highway safety director joined a cadre of local law enforcement and community officials to rally public support for the parish's "Don't Be a Zero" campaign - part of an anti-drunk-driving initiative launched last year.

"Alcohol and driving in Louisiana is an epidemic," said James E. Champagne, a retired State Police colonel and executive director of the Louisiana Highway Safety Commission. "It's a public health crisis!"

Champagne joined Terrebonne's District Attorney Joe Waltz Jr., Sheriff Jerry Larpent, schools Superintendent Ed Richard Jr. and a host of local police officers, sheriff's deputies and representatives from the District Attorney's office and the Terrebonne Council on Aging at a news conference Thursday at State Police Troop C headquarters in Gray.

The goal of the event, which featured impromptu speeches from local leaders, was to court community support for a parish-wide crackdown on drunk driving begun in earnest last year with the implementation of a special court designed to handle drunken-driving prosecutions.

The program is partly paid for through a $85,000 grant from the Louisiana Highway Safety Commission, with the parish providing matching money.

**TROUBLING STATISTICS**

About 25,000 people were arrested for drunken driving in Louisiana last year, Champagne said. Of that number, 16,000 lived in the southern part of the state.

According to state highway data, 209 people were injured in alcohol-related crashes on Terrebonne roads in 2006. The drunken-driving crashes claimed 11 lives that year in the parish.

A total of 42 people were killed in wrecks in 2006 in Troop C's patrol area, which includes Thibodaux.

**TERREBONNE**

Terrebonne, Lafourche and parts of St. James and St. John the Baptist parishes. That number climbed to 67 in 2006.

Though poor roads contribute to crashes, the high numbers of wrecks mainly illustrate troubling truths about Louisiana motorists, Champagne said.

"We're asleep drivers," said Champagne, a Raceland native. "We have horrible driving behaviors!"

A culture that is generally permissive when it comes to drinking and driving exacerbates the problem.

In 2005, almost half of Louisiana's crashes were alcohol related, according to a report released by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

"We have the second-worst record in the entire country," Champagne said.

He lauded the efforts of local officials to curb drunk driving, adding that he hopes Terrebonne's campaign serves as an example for the rest of the state.

"We're going to stop drinking and driving in this state because we have to do it," Champagne said.

**DWI COURT**

Though bars check for underage drinkers and increased DWI check points are also part of the "Don't Be a Zero" campaign, the parish's DWI court - the first of its kind in Louisiana - is the effort's cornerstone.

Modelled after the Terrebonne drug court founded in 2001, the DWI Court is intended to treat and rehabilitate second-offense drunken drivers, if they opt to enter a plea in the special court, according to Danny Smith, the parish's DWI/Drug Treatment Court coordinator. Drivers receive the same penalties - a one-year license suspension of up to $1,000 and up to six months in jail - but are also required to undergo intensive treatment for substance abuse designed to help them avoid the risk of becoming a third-offense drunken driver.

Not surprisingly, few offenders opt into the DWI Court at first. There was no incentive, Smith said, since all but two days of a second-offense drunken driver's jail time is generally suspended, fines and community service hours are assessed and the offender is required to attend a driver-education class. Those punishments pale in comparison to the requirements of the DWI Treatment Court, which include a minimum of 17 court appearances, 68 Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, installation of an Ignition Interlock system on cars, twice weekly drug and alcohol testing and attendance at a Mothers Against Drunk Driving victim impact panel, among other court mandates.

"For the first six months, all we did was do battle with these people," Smith said.

The real test in the drunken-driving crackdown came when the District Attorney's office decided to begin calling for the maximum prison terms under the law - six months - if offenders decided not to enroll in the DWI Court, which is supervised by District Judge Johnny Walker. Though the final sentence is out of the prosecutor's hands, more of the parish's judges are coming on board, Smith said. As a result, about 25 offenders have opted into the treatment court so far, Smith added.

**CHANGING THE CULTURE**

Though the court may be the biggest piece of the puzzle, reducing the number of drunken drivers on local roads must be a community effort, a point repeated by several speakers at the conference.

DWI checkpoints and road patrols are limited by manpower and will never catch every intoxicated driver, officials said.

"We can't do it alone. We need the community to get involved with us," said State Police Sgt. Judy Blanchard. "Troopers urged motorists to "call 1-1-3-8" (or 5577) to report drunken drivers.

Echoing a common theme, Waltz said a culture of drinking and driving is ingrained in Louisiana society.

"Every one's guilty of it," he added.

Terrebonne Sheriff Jerry Larpent, a veteran of dozens of drunken-driving wrecks from a 40-year career as a sheriff's deputy, said intoxicated drivers exact a terrible toll in the community.

"The choices they make affect everybody," he said.

Though Larpent didn't mention her name during the news conference, Amanda Larpent, the sheriff's 22-year-old niece, was killed July 27 when a 19-year-old drunken driver allegedly ran a red light and crashed into her car.

Jr. Carrol, 19, of Mobile, Ala., failed a breath alcohol test administered after the crash, police said, registering a 0.28.

The legal limit is 0.08 for adults and 0.02 for those under 21.

Changing that culture is key to reducing the number of parish residents killed by drinking and driving, he said.

"We need to try to break that cycle," Larpent said. "It has been accepted for generations and generations."

Schools Superintendent Ed Richard said the District Attorney's education programs, such as the prom-season anti-drunk-driving video shown this year at local high schools, could make the difference in eradicating acceptance of drinking and driving in Terrebonne.

"If we can change our youth, maybe we have a chance of turning this community around," he said.

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