

Operation Westroads – Not Just for the Outback

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Biographies

Prior to working in Road User Safety Robin Presland had a diversified career as a nursing sister both in Australia and Overseas. As a mature age student Robin completed a Bachelor of Arts (Psychology) and a Bachelor of Education (Counselling). She joined Vicroads in Melbourne as a staff counsellor in 1989. In 1991 Robin moved to the Road User Behaviour Section where she worked until 1993. She later moved to Bendigo taking up a position as Community Road Safety Officer and then as Road Safety Coordinator, Northern Region. Following a dare Robin won a position as Road User Safety Manager, RTA Western Region where she has been since 1997.

Sgt Peter HOSKING joined the N.S.W. Police in April 1985. Working general duties on the Northern Beaches of Sydney. Soon after he was transferred to the Frenchs Forest H.W.P. and then Bathurst H.W.P. in 1987. He was then transferred to Lithgow Hwp during 1996 and obtained the Highway Patrol Supervisors Position in July 1999. He has worked in that position since. He has had input into N.S.W. Police Enforcement campaigns during the last 4 years across the Tablelands Area including the response to the yearly car races at Bathurst and now Operation "WestRoads".

Summary

Operation Westroads is a response to a sharp increase in the road toll in Western Region in 2002. It is an intensive, multi faceted intervention founded on intelligence based police enforcement coordinated with targeted public education and community involvement activities. Six months after its launch fatalities and injuries in the Region have fallen significantly. This paper outlines the scope of the problems experienced by Western Region, the process involved in developing Operation Westroads and the outcomes to date.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper illustrates the benefits gained from the synergy created when intelligence based enforcement is coordinated and integrated with public education and community involvement. These factors, underpinned by a dedicated Police Service and road safety professionals, has delivered real safety benefits to our Region and appears to be making a significant difference to the road toll.

2. BACKGROUND

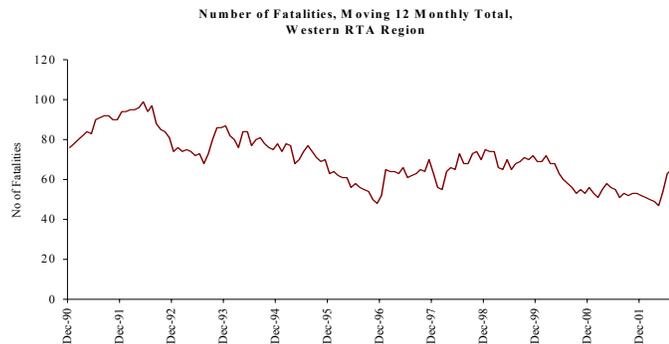
2.1 About Western Region

The RTA's Western Region is vast and, with the exception of the densely populated south-east corner, (the "Central West"), is sparsely populated.

Western Region covers 54% (431,539-sq km) of the state's land area yet only 5.5% (333,000) of the NSW population live in the region.

Travelling long distances is part of life in the west. There is a minimum distance of 50km between major towns with 50% of distances being greater than 100km. It is not uncommon for residents to drive to Sydney or Canberra on shopping trips, business or for entertainment.

Almost 60% (191,626) of the Western region population live in the southeast corner comprising just 10% of the land area. This area is characterised by winding roads, steep grades coupled with the higher rainfall and snow and ice in winter creating a challenging road environment.



2.2 Crash History

Over a ten-year period RTA Western Region recorded a downward trend in annual road fatalities. However, in 2002 there was a sharp rise in the road toll; 69 fatalities were recorded up 33% on the previous year and, at the time 'Operation Westroads' was conceived, up 83%.

The densely populated south-east corner referred to as the 'Central West', was identified as the worst area for fatal and injury crashes. This area accounted for 50% of fatal and 64% of injury crashes in the region in 2002.

The 'Central West' is centred on the larger urban centres of Dubbo, Orange and Bathurst and their neighbouring local government areas. It covers the four police local Area Commands of Chifley, Mudgee, Canobolas and Orana. Various factors contributed to these crashes, notably males aged between 17 and 39 years, speeding, driver fatigue and not wearing a seat belt.

2.3 Central West Crash Snapshot

- In the 3- year period 2000-2002 there were 95 fatal and 2045 injury crashes in the 'Central West' area.
- Fatal crashes increased by 21% in 2002 while injury and non-injury crashes decreased.
- The real challenge is male drivers who are involved in 77% of fatal crashes and 65% of injury crashes. Those involved are young, mostly aged from 17-39 years
- Speeding is the biggest contributor to fatal (49%) and injury (27%) crashes in the area. Eighty three percent (83%) of fatal speeding crashes involve males.
- Driver Fatigue is another significant issue contributing to 27% of fatal and 12% of injury crashes again mostly involving males (70%).

- Drink driving and not wearing a seat belt each contributes to 20% of fatal crashes respectively.
- Fatal and injury crashes average 58.4 per month. March-June and October to December have above average fatal and injury crashes with the highest number occurring in December. The worst days for fatal and injury crashes are Thursday through to Sunday.
- The stereotypical fatal crash occurs in a rural area on a straight, undivided, sealed road with a 100km speed zone in daylight. Three possible scenarios may occur, there is a head on collision, or the driver loses control, runs off the road and hits an object or rolls over.

3. TAKING ACTION

In late 2002, the process began to address the skyrocketing road toll. In the first instance the RTA Regional Manager, the Road Safety and Traffic Manager and the General Manager Road Safety and Strategy met to discuss the issue. They then approached the Police Assistant Commissioner based in Dubbo with a proposal to implement a Westsafe- style strategy in Western Region.

His reaction was very positive but to ensure the full involvement of regional police it was necessary to gain the approval and backing of the Local Area Commanders (LAC), the Highway Patrol Supervisors, RTA road safety staff and Council Road Safety Officers. Each was approached in turn and their reactions were encouraging.

A regional management group and Westroads Operational Taskforce were set up to establish and keep the operation on track as well as channel feedback.

The Operational Taskforce identified black lengths, times of day and week for targeted enforcement, developed the enforcement logistics and planned the public education component; They ensured links with the Local Government Road Safety Officers and reported on enforcement and media tracking outcomes.

Just before the 'Operation West roads' launch, a meeting was held with all stakeholders to ensure all were fully aware of the enforcement and education plans and their role in realising the project.

The Minister for Roads launched 'Operation Westroads' on the 20th February 2003 in Cowra under the banner *Operation Westroads –helping to cut the road toll.*

4. PUBLIC EDUCATION

The public education component was shaped by the crash data analysis. Since speeding contributed to almost 50% of fatal crashes, this was the primary target of advertising along with seat belts that contributed to 20% of fatal crashes. In conjunction with the speeding and seat belt commercials localised enforcement commercials were aired to increase the perception of the level of police enforcement.

The commercial "Police Officer" featuring a local Highway Patrolman with the tag line "help us to save lives on country roads" ran for the first 3 weeks of the campaign. This commercial set the agenda for the campaign highlighting the role of police, not as revenue raisers, but as agents for road safety. At the same time radio seatbelt and enforcement radio commercials went to air.

The primary target was male's aged 20-39 years, as this was the primary target group. The media schedule was aligned with the identified high crash risk days and times. To supplement the electronic media and give a message at the point of the behaviour, enforcement messages were also placed on petrol pumps at major service stations throughout the 'Central West' and we sponsored nightly weather updates on television.

To promote the 'Operation Westroads' brand and its message 'Helping to cut the road toll' 'Operation Westroads' signs were placed on highways at the exit and entrance to major towns in the area. Banners and rollaway blinds enhanced these with the same message being displayed at public places in major towns in line with police enforcement.

Our 'Community Speed Watch' program utilising courtesy speed checks was also in use in the area to coincide with the public education campaign.

The Local Government Road Safety Officers (RSO) have been encouraged to become involved by organising local media releases and photo opportunities in conjunction with enforcement activity and link their programs to 'Operation Westroads'.

5. POLICE ENFORCEMENT

Police enforcement has been targeted and intelligence driven. It is based on a thorough analysis of the crash statistics identifying the high-risk roads within an area and the specific behavioural factors related to the crashes. As well as the high-risk days and times for crashes, local events are taken into account indicating an influx of people into town increasing the crash risk.

A matrix was developed covering the length of each Westroads phase. Police enforcement was rotated around the four Local Area Commands at 1-3 weekly intervals depending on statistical intelligence and local activities. Police resources including highway patrol vehicles from all LACs are pooled and one LAC is targeted in rotation. At times the VIP squad join the operation. This enables high profile enforcement that could not be otherwise achieved.

6. THE RESULTS

This process was reviewed regularly including weekly results of the police enforcement activities and a review at the quarterly Police, RTA and local Government coordination meeting. There the current road toll was reviewed together with the schedule for public education and the results of police enforcement during the period. Achievements as well as difficulties were discussed and solutions sought

Three tiers of evaluation have so far been implemented. They are:

1. Apprehensions and Traffic Infringement Notices TINS
2. Tracking study
3. Monitoring of the road toll

6.1 Apprehensions and Traffic Infringement Notices TINS

The police have done an extraordinary amount of work. From the commencement of 'Operation Westroads' until the end of Sequence 2. At the end of July a total of 6559 Traffic Infringement Notices have been issued. These included 3928 speeding offences, 324 heavy vehicle offences and 268 seat belt offences. Random Breath tests were performed on 55,403 drivers with 94 PCA offences identified.

6.2 The Tracking Study

The 'Operation Westroads' advertising campaign was tracked from beginning to the end of Sequence 2. The tracking sought to establish driver awareness of the campaign messages, the source of their information and their attitude to speeding, seatbelt wearing, driver fatigue, drink driving and police enforcement.

The study showed that the overall awareness of police enforcement operations increased during the two advertising bursts. This was particularly so for the primary target group (males 20-39 years).

The total campaign cut through was almost universal, with 96% of respondents reporting they had seen or heard at least one advertisement from the campaign. Importantly, the audience was taking out the intended road safety messages.

Some of the commercials had a better reach than others. Generally the commercials that were relevant to the area i.e. they featured local identities or places, were most successful.

Drivers expressed support for 'Operation Westroads' as a means for raising driver awareness of road safety issues. They also expressed an increased perception that if you don't wear your seatbelt, speed or drink drive you will be caught.

Self reported behaviour showed some promising trends. There has been a steady increase in the number of drivers reporting they '*never*' drive more than 15km/h over the speed limit and fewer drivers report having '*sometimes*' driven more than 15km/h over the posted speed limit. However, the proportion of drivers (15%) who say they drink drive or drive without a seatbelt has not changed.

In summary the Tracking study indicates that the advertising reached its target audience and had desired message takeout.

6.3 The Road Toll

Most pleasing of all has been a drop in the road toll. In the 'Central West' from January to August 2003 there has been a 53% reduction in fatalities, 16 have been recorded so far. Speeding related fatalities have dropped 76% (22), driver fatigue fatalities have dropped 50% (7) and fatalities related seatbelts by 23%.

Significantly fatalities involving young drivers aged 17-39 years have decreased 32% (17). Injuries in the area have fallen by 16%.

7. CONCLUSION

'Operation Westroads' is continuing with more resources being injected into both the enforcement and the public education arms. Indeed planning is underway to implement phases in Barwon, Oxley and New England Local Area Commands. A launch is scheduled for the 1st October 2003 in Tamworth.

The key to the success of Westroads is attributed to the synergy achieved by the integration of intelligence based enforcement, targeted public education and of course locally based activity. However underpinning any gains we have made is the enthusiasm and commitment of the players involved.

This process has highlighted that *we can* make inroads into our road toll. While it is still very early in this process, the stakeholders involved in Westroads are delighted with the initial results. These have helped fortify our resolve to continue with Westroads and deliver the highest possible road safety outcomes to our communities.