A multi-faceted approach to tackling drink drive
in a rural community: programs and their evaluation

Robinson, S.
Road Safety and Traffic Officer
Leeton Shire Council, NSW

Abstract
In 2007, Leeton Shire embarked on a multi-faceted approach to tackling drink driving in their community. The shire had a significant history of being the highest % of crashes relating to alcohol within the SW Region of the Roads and Traffic Authority (RTA) NSW with around 12% of injury and fatal crashes attributed directly to alcohol. The principal objective of this paper is to examine the programs used to tackle drink driving in this rural community and the impacts on drink drive incidents.

Keywords
Drink drive, road safety program

Introduction
Leeton is a rural Shire in south west NSW with a population of just over 12,000 spread over an area of approximately 1,132 square kilometres. It is a major centre for the production and processing of agricultural and food products, in particular rice, horticulture, grain and beef. The principal area of population is Leeton town with approximately 6,500 residents.

According to confirmed crash data figures compiled by the RTA for the period January 2004 to December 2008, Leeton shire has the highest percentage of alcohol related injury and fatal crashes in the region (see Appendix A). The state average percentage of alcohol attributed injury and fatal crashes over this same period is 5.5% and the south west region of the RTA being 7.0%. Leeton's percentage over this same period is 11.9% which also exceeds larger regional towns and cities such as Albury, Griffith and Wagga Wagga. Drink driving is a real problem in rural areas with 70% of all drink drive fatalities occurring in the country NSW.

Luckily, not all drink drivers are involved in injury or fatal crashes, although of course the potential is certainly there with an increased risk. In order to ‘catch’ these drivers before they can cause harm to themselves or others communities rely heavily on NSW Police and random breath testing. In 2008, NSW Police conducted more than 3.4 million RBT’s on the state’s roads and in Leeton charge rates of those ‘exceeding the prescribed content of alcohol limit’ stand at an average of 84, although detections are much higher.
So who are the drink drivers on our roads? The majority of drink drivers involved in fatal crashes are mean – 90%\(^iv\). Also, 33% of all fatal drink drive victims are aged 17-24 years of age, despite making up only 14% of all licensed drivers\(^v\). A further 25% are aged between 30-39 years of age. This equates to around 224 males under the age of 40 years dying unnecessarily on NSW roads in 2008.

So what really is the problem and why do drivers drink drive? Back in 2003, AC Neilsen undertook a Community Survey on attitudes towards drink driving which included 1143 telephone based interviews and provided an insight into the segmentation of the interviewees (AC Neilsen 2003 Community Survey on attitudes towards Drink Driving). The survey found that around 18% of the population are what has been categorized as Risk Takers.

Risk takers are relatively frequent drinkers and are the most likely to drive their cars to a drinking venue. They are also likely to have driven over the limit before and have every intention of continuing to do so. They also tend to socialize with others of a similar attitude to drinking and driving and the risk of ‘getting caught’ influences them more than the concern of being involved in a crash. They believe that they are able to control a vehicle and drive well despite consuming large amounts of alcohol.

The ‘tempted’ group are those who may be tempted to take a risk after having consumed alcohol but are medium consumers. They equate to around 29% of the population. They may be slightly over the limit and will ‘risk’ driving home as they believe ‘it won’t happen to me’.

The ‘conservative’ also account for around 29% of the population. They will consume alcohol but will normally arrange an alternative method of getting home. They will drink and drive but only if they are sure they are under the limit.

The last group are the ‘limiters’. They are basically the opposite of the risk takers and make up 24% of drivers on our roads. They do not kid themselves about their ability to drink and drive and will not take the risks like the ‘tempted’ group. They tend to be light alcohol consumers.

What is interesting is that the age group of 17-25, who are also over represented in alcohol related fatal crashes make up almost 15% of the ‘risk taker’ group and 50% of risk takers are male.

This mix of groups is very common in all areas of life, whether looking at smoking marijuana or recycling glass there are always two ends of the spectrum – neither of which are very easy to change. But in the middle are two groups that can be influenced by marketing, education and peer pressure.
Methods
When looking at drink driving in a rural community we are already aware from research noted above that the primary target for education is that of the 17-40 year old male. However, we are also looking at a broader education of the community in order to exert peer pressure on those classed within the ‘tempted’ and ‘conservative’ groups. Additionally we shall also be looking at ways to take away the excuses of the ‘tempted’ group or remove the temptation.

The usual recommendations from motoring and road safety organizations to limit drink driving include:
- Use public transport or a taxi
- Get a lift with someone who has not been drinking or using drugs
- Let people know where you are by taking your mobile or phonecard
- Stay at a friend’s house

Unfortunately, public transport is not an option in rural NSW. It doesn’t exist during the day let alone at night when most of our drink drivers are in operation. Taxi resources are often limited too. In Leeton we are lucky enough to have 5 taxis in operation but there are many smaller communities where even this resource is not available.

Getting a lift home with someone who has not been drinking is a popular choice for many. It has been promoted under many guises including designated driver programs.

So what have we been doing in Leeton? Within a relatively small community like Leeton town it is a lot easier to implement a multi-faceted approach to drink driving in the community as you can often build up individual relationships with the licensees and local police.

I joined Leeton Shire Council in 2005 as Road Safety Officer and to date there had been advertising around Christmas and press releases about drink driving with several licensed venue demonstrations by the previous road safety officer. Here, members of the audience would be given alcoholic beverages and then requested to use a breathalyzer unit to demonstrate how different people absorb alcohol at different rates and how long alcohol remained in their systems.

Since then we have initiated several programs including:

1) Free breath tests at major events including picnic races and sports meetings so that people can check their alcohol levels prior to driving home.
   This has proved popular but like many of the breathalyzer units based in pubs and clubs groups of people will often use the equipment as a competition as to who can blow the highest reading. Whilst this is obviously not ideal it does give you an opportunity to engage people who would otherwise not pay any attention to drink drive advertising and
educate them about how alcohol works in the body and the time required to break it
down within the body.

2) Designated driver programs. Each year at Christmas all the licensed premises in Leeton
run a designated driver program whereby wristbands are provided to those who register
as designated drivers. These wristbands are accepted at all venues so does not lead to
complications when moving from venue to venue.

3) A formal Liquor Accord. This has been important in the running of drink drive and alcohol
education programs as it is a formal committee to make presentations and to ensure
consistent messages and unity in adoption.

4) Catch You Later Leeton. This program has probably proved to be the most successful in
terms of measuring outcomes, raising profile and taking the ‘tempted’ groups out of the
equation. Catch You Later works by utilizing local taxis and also providing a promotional
medium for licensed venues.
How it works. People taking a night out book a taxi and pay the fare to a participating
venue. The driver then gives them a voucher. The patron then takes the voucher to the
licensed venue and hands it to the bar person. The bar person signs the voucher and
takes $1 from the patron which is the cost of his taxi home. He gives the completed
voucher to the patron. He also gives the patron a $5 voucher towards food or raffle
tickets, so encouraging him to come back to the venue at a later date and spend more
money. The patron then gives the completed voucher to the taxi driver on the way home
as payment for this trip. The taxi driver then sends the voucher to the Road Safety
Officer for redemption of the remaining fare.
This works on many levels, particularly in a small country town which has been in
drought for 8 years. It provides extra business for the taxi operators. It provides return
business for the venues. It also takes the ‘tempted’ group off local roads by having them
take a taxi to the venue in the first instance as these people would probably drive home
under the influence of alcohol if their vehicle was available to them.

5) Co-ordinated RBT activity and high profile media campaigns in line with NSW Police
operations and the RTA.

6) Rotary Youth Driver Awareness Program. Each year we take around 600 Year 11
students to a local venue to talk to them about road safety with speakers including
ambulance officers, highway patrol, NSW Police Community Liaison, driving instructors
and financial experts. Within this forum we talk at length about drink driving and the risks
that this activity poses.
7) Good Sports. Within Leeton we have also launched Good Sports which is a program dedicated to reducing the abuse of alcohol within sporting communities. Here again we concentrate on drink driving risks.

8) Party Safe. At the end of the school year we work with schools in the local area to provide information on safe alcohol use at parties and the need to plan transport.

9) Local businesses safe driving policy. Each Christmas season every business in Leeton is sent information about organizing alternative transport for their employees attending Christmas parties and reminding them that they still have a duty of care to their employees.

Results
Over the last two years that these programs have been running we have undertaken a survey within the local population in order to validate the programs and measure awareness.

Table 1. LEETON SHIRE SURVEY FOR DRINK DRIVE PROGRAM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Timing within project lifecycle</th>
<th>Before</th>
<th>During</th>
<th>After</th>
<th>% change before and after project</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If you plan a night out drinking do you also plan how you intend to get home? YES (this question is verified by asking what method they intend to use eg lift home, pick up by family, licensed premises transport, taxi, designated driver)</td>
<td>33/60</td>
<td>58/60</td>
<td>52/60</td>
<td>+32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would you get in a vehicle with a driver that had been drinking and who you felt was over the limit? NO</td>
<td>50/60</td>
<td>58/60</td>
<td>57/60</td>
<td>+12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think that if you drink and drive you will get away with it? NO (this question further verified by outlining consequences of drink driving inc license suspension, fines, injury etc)</td>
<td>35/60</td>
<td>50/60</td>
<td>41/60</td>
<td>+10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you happy to risk drinking and driving? NO</td>
<td>46/60</td>
<td>54/60</td>
<td>51/60</td>
<td>+8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Do you understand how much you can drink before you are over the limit?

| 35/60 | 43/60 | 44/60 | +15% |

YES

Table 1 shows the average results over the two years of the programs being in place. It measures attitudes prior to the programs’ launch, during the programs and after the programs have been completed.

The survey demonstrates that there is a change in attitude towards drink driving and people have been educated as to the risks associated with this activity.

However, the sample size is small so what about the influence of these programs on alcohol related crashes in the Shire.

Table 2. Injury and fatal crashes attributed to Alcohol - Leeton Shire 2000-2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of alcohol related fatal and injury crashes</th>
<th>Percentage of total number of fatal and injury crashes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion
It would appear from the above results that the multifaceted approach to drink drive related programs is working on many different levels to achieve a reduction in fatal and injury crashes related to alcohol.
In both 2007 and 2008 we have also seen a reduction in high and medium range PCA’s over the period but an increase in low level PCA’s and morning after PCA infringements.

This is an interesting dilemma as currently the RTA does not support or provide educational materials to help people understand alcohol absorption and breakdown or how many standard drinks are permissible before you are going to be ‘over the limit’. The issue of education regarding alcohol consumption is a much wider community issue which has achieved a lot of coverage over the last year which is that of the relationship of alcohol within our culture and its’ cost to the community.

Figures available through the Community Alcohol Action Network show that alcohol is the most widely used psychoactive substance in Australia with approximately 1.3 million Australians consuming alcohol daily. Alcohol misuse in Australia is second only to tobacco as a preventable cause of death and hospitalization.

Over the last 2 years Leeton has also been part the Alcohol Action in Rural Communities (AARC) Project run by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre. Research here showed that alcohol related crime, excluding driving offences cost the Leeton community $1,072,017 over this period, including malicious damage and assaults.
Does this perhaps indicate that we should not just be looking at drink driving in isolation but as one of the many symptoms of our cultural reliance on alcohol? After all those that know only too well about the consequences of drink driving are still undertaking this risky behavior, including police, judges, emergency services personnel and even TAC workers.

Conclusion

Whilst I do not advocate that every road safety professional take it upon themselves to run single handed campaigns to rid our communities of alcohol, I would urge Councils and government organizations to perhaps consider all of the possible outcomes from authorising more licensed premises and not educating communities on the wider issues including drink driving. Drink driving and alcohol education cannot be performed in isolation.

But as road safety professionals we still fight the fight and a multifaceted drink drive education program has far reaching effects within the community. It helps make people aware of the issue within their community and raises positive peer pressure. Programs also assist by providing patrons with the facilities to make better decisions such as designated driver and alternative transport programs.

So where to now? Well this year we are looking to run all of the above programs plus a new project targeting the ‘morning after’ drivers who are being caught with RBT’s in the mornings after their night of drinking. This fits particularly with young drivers as males under 25 are more prone to binge drinking and therefore have more alcohol units to breakdown over a relatively short period of time. This will be a pilot program – the first of its type in NSW and will include educational posters and hand stamps which will remain on the patrons hand until the next morning and will prompt them to think about their blood alcohol level.

Recommendation

Sometimes in rural communities the ‘big’ corporate and national campaigns do not have the same effect as smaller highly targeted programs. Whilst country councils and their road safety officers may not have the big budgets of the metropolitan councils a difference can be made because you are important to the community you live in. An invaluable asset can sometimes be the intimacy of a small town and the impact you can have on individuals within that community.

---

1 Figure from RTA website – accident statistics as at 20th August 2009
2 Figure from RTA website - drink driving the facts as at 20th August 2009-
3 Number of legal actions commenced by the NSW Police Force rather than the number of incidents recorded.
Figures from NSW Recorded Crime Statistics 2004-2008
4 Figure from RTA website – accident statistics as at 20th August 2009
5 Figure from RTA website – accident statistics as at 20th August 2009
6 Australian Drug and Alcohol Federation web site – binge drinking dangers for young people