

Alaska State Troopers' DUI Enforcement Teams



Their Mission: Rid Alaska's Roadways of Impaired Drivers

By Megan Peters
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At 10 p.m. on Dec. 9, 2007 just like every Saturday night, the Alaska State Troopers' Southcentral DUI Enforcement Team hit the road.

Its mission: rid Alaska's roadways of impaired drivers.

On that particular night, Sgt. Steve Adams patrolled the Mat-Su Valley in his specially marked black patrol car.

After pulling a few people over for minor offenses, dispatch contacted Adams at approximately 12:25 a.m. with word of a REDDI – Report Every Drunk Driver Immediately – call that had come in from someone in the public. The dispatcher said someone had called claiming a heavily intoxicated man left a local bar to drive himself home. The complainant was also able to give the driver's name, a vehicle description, home address and the route the driver planned to travel.

The success of the team's mission relies heavily upon these types of tips from the public. There were 1,222 REDDI calls to troopers in this area in 2007, according to B Detachment Commander Capt. Dennis Casanovas.

Adams was roughly four miles away from where the driver was reported to be. Armed with good information on where the driver was headed, Adams headed down Knik Goose-Bay Road. He occasionally activated his emergency lights and siren to get through traffic while trying to catch up to the suspected vehicle.

After going to the home of the alleged drunk driver and not finding him there, Adams stopped by a few local bars in the area to see if he may have stopped for another drink. No luck; Adams missed him.

On his way back into Wasilla, the vehicle Adams was after drove by, headed in the opposite direction. Adams flipped the cruiser around and for the second time, went after the alleged drunk driver.

The driver was interviewed and given a series of Standardized Field Sobriety Test. He admitted to having a few beers with dinner and showed signs of impairment during the SFSTs. After blowing a .094 in



Sgt. Steve Adams is the supervisor of the Southcentral DUI Enforcement Team.



In 2007, 5,575 people were arrested for driving under the influence, a slight increase over the previous year but fewer than the number of arrests in 2005.

the field, he was arrested for driving under the influence.

Somewhere during this time, a truck pulled in behind Adams followed by another trooper cruiser with flashing lights. It was the daughter of the man just arrested.

“Take me instead,” said the woman as she stumbled out of the second truck.

During a roadside interview with a patrol trooper, the woman said she didn’t think her dad was really drunk. She stated she called him in as a drunk driver because she was mad that he didn’t stay with her at the bar.

She received, and failed a field sobriety test and blew higher than her father. She was also placed under arrest and charged with Driving Under the Influence.

Adams contacted other drivers that night, but none were arrested for DUI. The team – with three of four troopers on the team patrolling that night – arrested five individuals for DUI that shift.

The first DUI Team was put together in 2003. The first patrol hit the roads under the supervision of Sgt. Rick Terry, who has since retired.

The Southcentral bunch is one of two DUI Enforcement Teams in the state. The second, and newest team, is stationed out of Fairbanks.

The Southcentral team is made up of four members: Adams and troopers Luis Nieves, Steven Kevan and Andy Gorn. Nieves, Kevan and Gorn are all relatively new to the team. Adams said they have done well since starting, but expects great things from the team as a whole once they all learn the ropes.

Simple things like driving without headlights turned on, burned out head or tail lights or drivers not using turning signals are initially what catches the eye of troopers on patrol and sometimes lead to the discovery of an impaired driver.

Troopers also watch the driving patterns, i.e. speed, drifting or weaving between or hugging the lines instead of staying in the middle of the lane.

Not all impaired drivers behave the same way. It is usually a combination of bad driving habits that tips the DUI Enforcement Team off to an impaired driver.

Adams said it bothers him that people think they merely lay in wait in bar parking lots. Although the team does swing through them from time to time during patrols, they rarely sit and wait. They patrol the main streets as well as back streets as people who know they are too drunk to drive think they can make it home undetected by



A member of the Southcentral DUI Enforcement Team heads out on a patrol.

police and troopers if they only travel a less popular route.

The teams can be deployed anywhere along the road system and sometimes travel to special events such as the Girdwood Forest Fair or the Talkeetna Blue Grass festival.

Because impaired drivers aren't bound by the darkness, the teams don't always patrol during the night. Some people drive themselves home after sleeping off a night of hard partying not realizing they are still impaired. The average number of arrests evens out to about one DUI arrest per team member on shifts they patrol.

On Sept. 1, 2001 legislation in Alaska was passed changing the legal limit of blood alcohol concentration. The limit was reduced from .10 to .08 Blood Alcohol Content (BAC). Legislation also made it illegal to drive a vehicle while showing impairment due to being under the influence of controlled substances such as marijuana, cocaine or prescription medications.

Several things happened as a result of the .08 BAC law: It increased the arrests and convictions for impaired drivers; it raised the perceived risk of arrest for driving after drinking alcohol; it improved public awareness about how much alcohol it takes to cause impairment and it brought the United States closer to limits of most industrialized nations. The BAC level in Sweden, for example, is .02.

During the past three calendar years, the amount of individuals arrested for DUIs in Alaska has remained well over 5,000 per year. However, the number appears to be moving in a downward trend. In 2005, law enforcement officers made 5,713 arrests on not only Alaska's roads but also on the waterways and in the backcountry. In 2006, the number of arrests dropped to 5,456. In 2007, the state saw a slight increase with a total of 5,575 people arrested for Driving Under the Influence.

Every time a person chooses to drive impaired, it puts lives at risk. Driving under the influence is 100-percent preventable. Here are some tips to keep you and your family and friends safe from impaired drivers:

- Plan ahead. If you know you will be drinking, play it safe and leave your car at home.
- If you start drinking, before you've had one too many call someone and make arrangements to get picked up.
- Remember, you don't have to feel impaired to be impaired.
- Volunteer to be the sober driver.
- Set up a schedule for who will be the sober driver at different events.
- The best defense against an impaired driver is to wear your seatbelt.

Driving impaired is a crime. We encourage everyone to report impaired drivers. Every second an impaired driver is on the road, the community is in danger. To make a REDDI Report, call 911 or your local law enforcement immediately. REDDI Reports can be made to troopers anonymously.