

Congressional Testimony

*-John Wheeler, Governor's Crime Advisor for Rachel O'Connor, DWI Czar, State of New Mexico
Committee on Environment and Public Works,
-Subcommittee on Transportation Safety, Infrastructure Security and Water*

United States Senate

October 25, 2007

10 am

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, my name is John Wheeler, Crime Advisor to Bill Richardson, Governor of the State of New Mexico. I am here to present information regarding our DWI programs on behalf of Governor Richardson and the State's DWI Czar, Rachel O'Connor. It is a pleasure to be here today.

New Mexico has both a chronic problem with drunk driving and a long history of utilizing creative and innovative solutions to solve it. From 1979 through 1996 New Mexico led the nation in drunken driving fatalities. In the early 1990's New Mexico had nearly 400 alcohol involved fatalities per year. In 2006, New Mexico had 191 fatalities and preliminary statistics for 2007 indicate a third consecutive year of record low numbers.

The Richardson Administration has instituted a number of progressive programmatic and policy changes that have reduced alcohol involved fatalities in New Mexico. I would like to discuss programs that we believe have been effective:

Leadership: In 2003 the Governor convened state agency representatives and advocates to develop a statewide strategic plan to reduce alcohol involved fatalities. Based on the recommendations of the planning team the Governor in 2004 hired a "**DWI Czar**" a Cabinet level position charged with implementing the State Plan and leading our efforts on DWI. In 2005 as part of a National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) funded law enforcement effort the State also developed a "**Leadership Team**" on DWI which includes representation from all state agencies, courts, and the advocacy community. The Leadership Team provides a single point of focus to discuss mutual issues and make recommendations regarding DWI program and policy issues.

Enforcement and Public Awareness: New Mexico uses DWI checkpoints to reduce drunk driving and raise awareness of enforcement initiatives. In 2004 the State increased its number of "**Superblitzes**" which are two week periods that include a high concentration of checkpoints. The State uses federal Section 164 and Section 410 enforcement dollars to fund approximately 700 DWI checkpoints a year through its Superblitz and checkpoint program.

The State of New Mexico also receives funds from NHTSA's Section 403 and Section 164 programs to fund a pilot program with **full time DWI law enforcement** officers in those counties where DWI is the deadliest. Enforcement efforts are accompanied by an extensive multi-media campaign (funded by Section 164 and Section 410) entitled "**You Drink, You Drive, You Lose**" and outreach coordinators who increase the visibility of law enforcement through non traditional media efforts.

In 2006 the Department of Public Safety started the *Drunkbuster* Hotline, a toll free hotline to report drunk driving. In 2007 Drunkbusters has received over 11,000 calls resulting in over 400 contacts with police that may not otherwise have occurred. The State has also increased both the enforcement efforts and the *penalties for bars and restaurants* that chronically serve minors or person who are intoxicated. Both of these projects are funded primarily by State dollars and are supplemented by Section 164 dollars.

Ignition Interlock: In 2004 Governor Bill Richardson spearheaded a Task Force to study and make recommendation regarding the use of Ignition Interlock as a tool to reduce recidivism and deter drunk driving in New Mexico. In 2005 the Governor signed the Ignition Interlock act, becoming the *first state to mandate Ignition Interlocks for all convicted DWI offenders, including first time offenders.*

Native American: Both nationally and in New Mexico, Native Americans die from alcohol involved crashes at a rate of up to five times that of non-natives. In 2007 the Governor by Executive Order appointed the State Tribal DWI Task Force to make recommendations to reduce alcohol involved fatalities on tribal lands. The State has been proactive in this issue, developing the first television public service announcement that addresses drunk driving among Native American tribes, and hiring a DWI Tribal Coordinator to liaison between the State and New Mexico tribes on issue related to enforcement, public policy, public awareness and data sharing. Both the Coordinator and the PSA were funded by Section 164 dollars.

I want to conclude by emphasizing several points. Using preliminary figures for 2007 we expect to experience an over 20% reduction in alcohol involved fatalities from 2005-2007; and an equal drop in alcohol involved crashes and injury crashes. Secondly, the State utilizes and is grateful for the nearly \$10 million dollars per year in funding that we received from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) to implement many of these programs in our State. Finally, we believe it is not just one effort but a combination of the above described efforts that have led to our reduction.

Thank you.