



Webinar Focuses on Reducing Traffic Fatalities

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“Are you the new trooper in town?” the waitress asked one of her customers. “We know one of you lives here now, because people see him everywhere.”

Neither the trooper she asked nor any other Iowa state trooper had moved to that small town. However, community members thinking one had means that the state’s emphasis on community “touches” to reduce traffic crashes and fatalities is working.

The Iowa program, along with another initiative sponsored by the Metro Nashville Police Department, was featured in Reducing Traffic Fatalities in Urban and Rural Areas: Notes from NIJ’s LEADS Program, a webinar held August 1 cosponsored by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) and the Justice Clearinghouse. Featured speakers Capt. Ken Clary of the Iowa State Patrol and Sgt. James Williams of Metro Nashville, both NIJ LEADS scholars, explained the origins of their projects, their impacts to date and their plans for the future.

“It’s a different way of thinking about traffic,” Clary says. “It’s not the citations we write, but the crashes we prevent, that measure our success.”

In a 10-year period ending in 2017, the United States saw 37,000 deaths result from

traffic accidents, compared to 16,000 from murder, so “reducing traffic deaths may not be the sexiest statistic, but law enforcement can make its largest impact trying to reduce those,” he says. Iowa’s program set out to do that by changing driver behavior, because 94 percent of traffic accidents result from human behavior such as not wearing seat belts, driving while impaired, looking at devices and speeding.

Because 70 percent of traffic accidents occur on rural roads, Clary developed a program focused on determining traffic accident hot spots throughout the state:



two towns and one rural roadway in each county. Throughout 2018, 16 state troopers made several “touches” every day in these hot spots areas, establishing a frequent law enforcement presence where formerly there was none.

Clary explains that due to staff shortages, the Iowa State Patrol had mainly focused its traffic enforcement efforts on highways and interstates, but 70 percent of all accidents take place on rural roads, usually within a couple of miles of town limits.

“We are social beings, we get together, we drink to excess, and we take a calculated risk that we will not see law enforcement. The accidents don’t happen in the towns, where the speed limits are low and there are no curves,” Clary says. “Rather, as soon as they get out of town where they speed up and have to navigate curves, accidents start to happen at a high rate.”

He could have asked his troopers to go into the towns and make highly visible traffic stops on the town square. Instead, he asked them go into bars and talk to patrons about not drinking and driving, or visit with farmers having their morning coffee at the local convenience store to talk about the importance of wearing seat belts. Swinging

through the towns and making frequent stops generates ongoing conversations among the residents and creates perceptions like the incident with the waitress mentioned above: “I told them to go where they’re not expected, when they’re not expected,” he says

The group of 16 troopers did this as their sole responsibility throughout 2018, and made almost 10,000 “touches.” In 2019, a group of 78 troopers is spending one hour per shift focused on this task, and made a similar number in the first quarter alone. The George Mason University Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy will help with data analysis so that the Iowa State Patrol can study the impact of the program.

The Metro Nashville Police Department also initiated a program to reduce traffic fatalities, starting in 2017 and expanding efforts in 2018. Three major interstates meet in downtown Nashville, and in all, the department is responsible for 2,200 miles of public right of way. Officers spend an average of 100 minutes per accident on response and reconstruction.

Metro Nashville first identified hot spots by looking at the roadways leading up to high-incident intersections. The Tennessee Department of Safety helped with analysis on contributing factors, determining that the majority of accidents resulted from following too closely, and the department selected the area around the intersection of Murfreesboro Pike and Dell Parkway for its pilot site.

“Anyone who takes crash reports knows that following too closely usually stems from something else, such as looking at their phones or being distracted for another reason. It doesn’t necessarily mean they were tailgating,” Williams says.

Metro Nashville decided to take a Highly Visible Enforcement (HVE) approach to try to encourage voluntary compliance and a change in behaviors. The department began by making frequent and highly visible stops during a two-hour period, two days a week, just before and during the evening rush hour.

“We gave them very specific instructions to focus on driving too closely, distracted driving, speeding and improper lane changes,” Williams says. “The goal was to be in the right place and the right time to stop the right offenders.”

Initial results were generally encouraging, although the department learned that the original plan of one week of enforcement per month resulted in accident rates initially dropping, then increasing by the third week, indicating a need for a three-, rather than

a four-week enforcement period. The program then expanded to a trial run that included seven total hot spots, and during the initial trial run of the expanded program, the project led to an overall 22-percent reduction in crashes.

“We now hope to institutionalize it and make it something we do continuously instead of just now and then,” Williams says. “We also want to improve our internal data analysis. We were lucky to have the state help us get started, but we need to do it on our own in the future.”

To access an archived version of the webinar, visit [here](#). Membership in the Justice Clearinghouse is required. Established in 2014 through a partnership between NIJ and the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), the Law Enforcement Advancing Data and Science (LEADS) Program develops the research capacity of mid-career law enforcement personnel who are committed to advancing and integrating science into law enforcement policies and practice. To accomplish this, merit-based scholarships are competitively awarded to mid-rank officers from agencies of any size and executives from small agencies who have effectively infused research into policy development within their agencies. For more information, visit [here](#).

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