

## **REGISTER GUARD**

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### **GUEST VIEWPOINT**

#### **Efforts to cut drunken driving have paid off**

By Barbara Stoeffler and Anne Pratt

The Oregon Department of Transportation report for 2005 shows that citizens in Eugene-Springfield need to pat themselves on the back. A nine-year study comparing Oregon's 10 largest cities shows Eugene-Springfield with:

- Half the statewide average rate of traffic fatalities.
- One-third the average rate of traffic fatalities in which alcohol was involved.
- Almost four times the number of citations for driving under the influence of intoxicants per alcohol-involved fatality.
- The lowest rate of crashes resulting in injuries.

These statistics are like a paycheck for all the hard work done by Mothers Against Drunk Driving volunteers, police and prosecutors.

MADD is grateful to everyone who tied on a red ribbon, assigned a designated driver, talked with their teenagers, sponsored a sober graduation party or pledged not to drive impaired. We appreciate the teachers who booked our speakers or encouraged students to enter our poster and essay contests, and the University of Oregon Greek houses for their efforts to increase awareness and raise funds for Lane County MADD.

These joint efforts have indeed paid off in fewer injuries and in lives saved.

MADD has been working with others in Lane County for 23 years, hoping for positive results for the sake of our citizens' safety. These results are possible because, while struggling to do more with less, Lane County public safety agencies have stepped up. The Springfield-Eugene area has many of the best and most committed law enforcement officers in Oregon; many have received state recognition for their work in DUII enforcement. The ODOT study indicates the same dedication exists among Lane County DUII prosecutors who, according to the report, are more likely than most to be successful in court. That earns Springfield-Eugene a lower recidivism rate while holding offenders accountable.

Action from community leaders, the media, volunteers, teachers and Lane County citizens has been the catalyst for this reduction. New programs have been developed to increase prevention education. One was initiated by MADD of Lane County to provide DUII/drug recognition workshops for our local law enforcement officers. Another, initiated by the courts and the survivors of drunk driving victims, is the Lane County DUII Victim Impact Panel. More than 25,000 have attended since 1990. Last year 1,798 arrestees and 316 guests heard panel members relate stories of personal tragedy. Persons arrested for drunk driving are mandated to attend by courts or treatment agencies.

Holidays, graduations and sports events are times when family and friends get together where alcohol and drugs are often available. During those times MADD and Eugene-Springfield businesses team up to increase awareness. Last July and December, during a "Keep Our Streets Safe" campaign, a free bus ride

home was offered Saturday nights for folks partying downtown. These campaigns may have also contributed to the reduction.

A sobering fact is that Lane County as a whole has a higher fatality rate than Eugene-Springfield. Higher speeds on rural roads greatly increase the likelihood of a fatal crash, thus making Lane County equal to the rest of Oregon. The nine-year study revealed that 14.7 percent of crashes were fatal with an alcohol involvement in 39 percent of those. More disappointments: Large number of citizens still driving impaired, a lack of jail space, too few patrol officers and barely enough prosecutors.

Since MADD's inception 25 years ago, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that 300,000 lives have been saved by MADD and other traffic safety organizations. National MADD has decided to restructure, to infuse new energy into the states rather than the top administrative level. MADD of Lane County has been given a greater role. We will be the Pacific Northwest Region Eugene Affiliate Office, a central office for the entire southern half of Oregon. Eventually, new staff will be added.

Our plan: Create new opportunities to reach a wider population and advertise MADD victim assistance. We are moving forward with plans to create a Victim Memorial Garden, providing a peaceful site in one of our local parks.

Although there is more to be done, there is much to be thankful for, and many to thank. Together we truly are making a difference.

*Barbara Stoeffler, founder of MADD Lane County Chapter in 1982, is a board member for the MADD Pacific NW Region Eugene Affiliate Office. Anne Pratt also serves as a board member.*