

## **DRIVING UNDER THE INFLUENCE**

### **An Irresponsible Decision**

**In your lifetime, you stand a 40% chance of being directly affected by an impaired driving incident.**

Earlier this month, yet another member of my Agency joined this appalling statistic. While she conducted speed enforcement duties with her patrol car parked on the highway shoulder, an impaired driver struck it from behind, leaving her injured and the offending driver in custody.

The underlying charge was ORS 813.010, Driving Under the Influence of Intoxicants (DUII). It is a crime that finds offenders in all walks of life, socio-economic class, gender, age, and lifestyle. Sinister in its nature by the toll it exacts in lives lost, permanently damaged, and legally ruined as well as economically in terms of medical costs, lost productivity, and property damage. DUII drivers account for about 40% of all traffic related deaths each year in Oregon. In Multnomah County alone, the annual price exacted by DUII offenders is about 483 fatal and serious injury crashes.

Worst of all, the DUII tragedy is entirely preventable.

There is no mystery that alcohol impairs a person's ability to operate a motor vehicle safely. We have also come to recognize that driving under the active influence of certain drugs and other like substances have similar harmful effects.

Then why, after decades of intensive public information campaigns, focused impaired driving enforcement efforts, nearly daily media accounts of the DUII related carnage on our roads, and scientific study after study have these over thirty year old statistics not changed for the better? Why are the public focus, societal pressures, and funding to address the issue in decline, while the DUII problem continues on as before?

The first responsibility lies with the offending driver. Like the legal and societal expectations that you will drive in a lane of travel and not the highway shoulder, it is the duty of a responsible citizen to not drive while impaired. We as a community must accept a difficult truth when a person decides to get behind the wheel after consuming or using an impairing substance. That person is making a conscious and entirely selfish decision to endanger not only themselves but us all.

DUII offenders are not necessarily evil or "bad" people, but make no mistake, they are criminal offenders. The defining characteristic DUII offenders share with other criminal offenders is the failure to make responsible choices. This failure on their part demands that the community hold them accountable.

The second responsibility lies with law enforcement, the jails, the courts, and treatment providers. For their part, large strides have been made in the prevention, detection, and apprehension of impaired drivers, as well as post conviction programs and treatment to prevent repeat offenders. However, they can only do so much to address the problem.

The final and most effective responsibility to prevent DUII offenses lies with the person staring back at you in the mirror. It takes the effort of each individual in the greater community to create the change in behavior. What price and inconvenience are you willing to pay to keep your family members and friends from driving impaired? Peer pressure to make responsible choices, public transportation, designated drivers, or even just taking the car keys still work to prevent a DUII offense from ruining a life, but it requires you to step up, take responsibility, and make what may be an unpopular stand.

To remain indifferent on the matter and choose the easy alternative of not taking action, or excusing, minimizing, dismissing, or ignoring the DUII problem means the community will continue to pay the same horrific price in lives lost and lives irreparably damaged year after year.