Sobriety/Traffic Safety Checkpoints

What are sobriety/traffic safety checkpoints?

As defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), "Sobriety checkpoints are traffic stops where law enforcement officers systematically select drivers to assess their level of alcohol impairment. The goal of these interventions is to deter alcohol-impaired driving by increasing drivers' perceived risk of arrest.… Selective breath testing checkpoints are the only type used in the United States…. Police must have a reason to suspect that drivers have been drinking before testing their blood alcohol levels."[1]

How do sobriety/traffic safety checkpoints reduce underage drinking and its consequences?

Sobriety checkpoints (also called roadside safety checks) are often used as part of comprehensive enforcement to deter alcohol-impaired driving. Combined with a vigorous awareness campaign, checkpoints tend to also decrease alcohol-related traffic crashes and fatalities among youth.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reports that 19 percent of drivers ages 15 to 20 involved in 2009 fatal crashes were alcohol impaired (with blood alcohol content of 0.08 or more).

How can my community take this action?

Take the following steps to initiate or strengthen sobriety checkpoints:

- **Assess your state's current law.** Find out if your state conducts sobriety checkpoints from the Governors Highway Safety Association® at http://www.ghsa.org/html/stateinfo/laws/checkpoint_laws.html. Because of constitutional issues and legal rulings, not all states conduct sobriety checkpoints. However, in some states where sobriety checkpoints are not legal or likely to occur, law enforcement can implement traffic safety checkpoints where testing for sobriety is only one aspect of a larger traffic safety check (e.g., checking that lights are working or children are in car seats). As of December 2013, 38 states, the District of Columbia, the Northern Mariana Islands, and the U.S. Virgin Islands conduct sobriety checkpoints.

- **Build community support and collect data.** Collect data about community-specific impaired driving rates, alcohol-related crashes, enforcement of impaired driving laws, and the types/numbers of consequences incurred when impaired driving laws are broken. This information can become your baseline data. When checkpoints

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1 CDC. (N.D.). Research update: Sobriety checkpoints are effective in reducing alcohol-related crashes. From http://www.cdc.gov/MotorVehicleSafety/Impaired_Driving/checkpoint.html (accessed December 15, 2013).

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are conducted, collect this information again to obtain outcome data.

- **Raise public awareness.** Vigorous and widespread campaigns about impaired driving laws improve their effectiveness. To bring recognition to your efforts, consider choosing a theme for all sobriety/traffic safety checkpoint activities (e.g., "Sober or Slammer" [South Carolina], "Operation Zero Tolerance" [Georgia], or "Smart, Safe and Sober" [Virginia]), including those done with the media.

- **Measure and report successful outcomes.** Some objective measures of the effectiveness of sobriety checkpoints follow. Identifying rates by age group will help determine how such checkpoints contribute to reductions in underage drinking:

  - Rates of alcohol-related nighttime crashes, injuries, and fatalities;
  - Rates of motorists detained for failed sobriety testing;
  - Rates of traffic stops and traffic safety checkpoints;
  - Rates of arrests and convictions for driving under the influence;
  - Number and types of arrests; and
  - Changes in number of impaired driving arrests.

Resources Supporting Action

CDC. (2012). Reducing alcohol-impaired driving: Publicized sobriety checkpoint programs. *Guide to Community Preventive Services.* From http://www.thecommunityguide.org/mvoi/AID/sobrietyckpts.html (accessed December 15, 2013).

CDC. (2011). *The Health Communicator's Social Media Toolkit.* From http://www.cdc.gov/healthcommunication/ToolsTemplates/SocialMediaToolkit_BM.pdf (accessed December 15, 2013).

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. (2006). *Low-Staffing Sobriety Checkpoints.* From http://www.nhtsa.gov/people/injury/enforce/LowStaffing_Checkpoints (accessed December 15, 2013).

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2010). *Focus on Prevention.* From http://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content/SMA10-4120/SMA10-4120.pdf (accessed December 15, 2013).

About Environmental Prevention

Environmental prevention focuses on changing the environment in ways that make alcohol less available and appealing to young people. Some goals of environmental prevention are to change social norms or attitudes relating to the use of alcohol, to restrict youth access to alcohol, and to strengthen enforcement of laws and regulations governing its use. Environmental prevention of underage drinking also includes:

- Alcohol compliance checks;
- Controls on alcohol outlet location and density;
- Graduated driver licensing laws;
- Increased taxes on sales of alcohol;
- Responsible beverage service;
- Restricted sales of alcohol at public events;
- Restrictions on low-price, high-volume drink specials; and
- Social host liability laws.

Visit https://www.stopalcoholabuse.gov/townhallmeetings for more information.

Materials to support national Town Hall Meetings on the prevention of underage drinking are provided by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.