

Close watch kept on DUI offenders

New plan includes on-the-spot tests

By Ray Huard

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In his 12 years as a San Diego County probation officer, Gonzalo Mendez has seen it all too often – someone on probation for drunken driving gets behind the wheel after drinking again and winds up killing someone in a car crash.

“They kill people every day,” Mendez said in an interview.

Twice, the horror of it became all too real for Mendez.

In 2002, his 30-year-old brother, Carlos, was killed by a drunken driver in Mexico.

In March, a close relative, Ramon G. Ulloa, 62, was killed by a drunken driver in Clairemont while Ulloa was driving home from work as a cashier at Costco.

Later, Mendez said, he learned from police that the man who killed Ulloa had a record of drunken driving.

Mendez was angry.

“I kept wondering, what could we do?”

Mendez got his answer on the job. Starting this month, probation officials will keep a closer watch on about 300 people who have two or more convictions for driving while drunk or on drugs to make sure they don't drive under the influence again.

Mendez will supervise the eight-officer unit, which was created through a two-year, \$1.1 million state grant to the county, part of \$5 million divided among 17 counties for such programs.

The officers will make unannounced visits to the homes of those on probation for driving under the influence to see if they have any alcohol or drugs.

Typically, convicted drunken drivers are prohibited from drinking alcohol as a condition of being placed on probation rather than going to jail, whether they plan to drive or not.

The officers will conduct on-the-spot drug and alcohol tests when they suspect someone has been drinking or taking drugs.

Before the start of the new program, probationers could be required to take drug and alcohol tests, but the tests weren't done in the field and weren't random, Mendez said. Probationers would be instructed to go to a county office to have the tests.

Probation officers also will check to make sure probationers are attending any court-ordered alcohol or drug treatment programs, and they will assist police in running sobriety checkpoints, Mendez said.

Those found to be violating probation by drinking, using drugs or skipping treatment classes will be arrested and could be sent to prison, Mendez said.

“What's unique about this program is that we've always had the offenders, we just didn't have the staffing to do something of this magnitude,” Mendez said.

Without the close supervision, the odds are that repeat drunken driving offenders on probation will again drive drunk or on drugs, said Chief Probation Officer Vince Iaria.

“These are very high-risk individuals by their past behavior problems,” Iaria said.

According to state Department of Motor Vehicle statistics, nearly 18 percent of those arrested in California for driving drunk or under the influence of drugs already were convicted for the same offense, and about 4 percent had two previous convictions, Iaria said.

Nationally, between 20 percent and 30 percent of those arrested for driving while drunk or on drugs are repeat offenders, and 30 percent of intoxicated drivers involved in fatal crashes have previous DUI arrests, said William Kootsikis, regional program administrator for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

“We have to start dealing with them in different ways and with different approaches,” Kootsikis said at a news conference announcing the grant.

The problem has been growing. From 2002 to 2004, the latest year for which figures are available, the number of drunken driving arrests in California grew from 15,924 to 17,129.

If the California program works, Kootsikis said, it will be expanded to other states.

The anger and frustration Mendez felt upon learning that his relative had been killed by someone with more than one drunken driving arrest is common, said Charissa McAfee, executive director of the San Diego County chapter of Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

“Anytime a person is killed by a drunk driver, it's difficult for a family. It's a senseless and preventable death. When it's a repeat offender, families are just beside themselves,” McAfee said. “They don't understand why more wasn't done to keep this individual off the road.”

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