

**Friday, August 25, 2006**

Last modified Thursday, August 24, 2006 10:28 PM PDT

Program targeting drunken drivers catches offenders off guard

By: GIG CONAUGHTON - Staff Writer

ESCONDIDO ---- In apartment complexes around Escondido on Thursday night, a stealthy scene played out over and over ---- five-man teams of probation officers and Escondido police officers huddled, then quickly knocked on doors, looking for drunken drivers.



*Escondido police Officer Frank Huston and San Diego County probation Officer Clint Armitage talk to residents at a apartment complex on E. Washington during a probation violations sweep of DUI parolees.*

*DON BOOMER North County Times*

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In some cases, curious neighbors and children watched as officers' knocks went unanswered, or had new tenants explain that the targets of the surprise searches ---- drunken drivers and, in some cases, fugitives ---- no longer lived there.

In other cases, shocked offenders cautiously opened doors, were handcuffed, asked to blow into Breathalyzers to find any trace of alcohol, and had their rooms searched.

The surprise searches kicked off a new County of San Diego program ---- funded by a \$1 million state grant ---- to try to catch repeat drunken drivers before they drink and drive again.

"These are the worst of the worst," 35-year-old county probation Officer Gonzalo Mendez ---- the head of the program ---- said as he briefed officers at the Escondido Police Station on Thursday night. "You're not on this caseload because you have a single DUI. You're on this caseload because you drove drunk and you injured somebody, or because you're a multiple offender."

Thursday night's visits marked the first time that the new program had been rolled out in earnest since county supervisors approved it in late June.

Mendez said he chose Thursday to roll out the program because it fell just a week before the Labor Day weekend, when many repeat offenders may be most tempted to drink and drive again.

"I wanted to do a pre-emptive Labor Day strike," Mendez said. "We're going to be out on Labor Day too, but I want people to get the message that, hey, we're going to be out there all the time. My goal is to save lives."

Starting at dusk, three five-man units rolled out of the Escondido Police Department parking lot in vans and police cars, aimed at knocking on 30-plus doors before the end of the night.

During the briefing, Mendez told the crew that some of the offenders had seven or more drunken driving convictions in a 10-year period. For others, drunken driving was just part of a resume that contained other criminal offenses such as robbery and burglary, he said.

"Knock, knock ---- How ya' doing tonight?" County Probation Officer Clint Armitage called in through an open screen door in the 1700 block of East Crofton Lane around 8 p.m. Behind Armitage, burly Escondido police officers watched the back and front of the apartment.

Mendez said the program's surprise searches were allowed because the targeted offenders were given probation ---- and gave up their rights to refuse being searched without probable cause ---- as a condition of the probation that kept them out of jail.

Before the night began, the crews were ready to transport dozens of offenders who tested positive for alcohol, or were found with drugs or weapons ---- all violations of probation ---- to jail.

One team arrested an offender after finding evidence of methamphetamine, Mendez said. Another offender was arrested after he tested positive for alcohol.

But as the night wore on, it was mostly quiet.

A couple of offenders were out ---- one at work, one reportedly at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. Others tested clean and were cleared.

At one apartment, residents were slow to answer and then told the team that the offender wasn't there ---- only to have officers discover him in a back room.

Outside on the porch, dozens of empty, "tall-boy" beer cans were tied in a clear garbage bag onto the handle of a little girl's purple-and-pink bicycle.

"Well, this concerns me here," Mendez said, pointing to the cans. "He does have two roommates. But this would be a red flag for us."

However, the man tested clean for alcohol when he blew into the hand-held Breathalyzer, and the team moved on.

Asked if it was disappointing not to have more arrests, Mendez quickly and emphatically said, "No."

The point of the program, he said, was to check for trouble and head it off.

"It's not disappointing," he said. "It means that they're actually complying with the conditions of the court. Our goal is double-edged. You know, to hold them accountable and to see them rehabilitated."

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