

House calls made on DUI offenders

Probation officers look for relapses

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ESCONDIDO – It was obvious by the beer cans on the front porch that the man who lived there – a man on probation for drunken driving – wasn't expecting a visit from county probation officers.

But on Thursday night, teams of probation and police officers swept through Escondido, knocking on the doors of 30 people on probation for repeat drunken driving offenses to make sure they were clean and sober.

Those who weren't, including the 23-year-old with empties on the porch, were taken back to jail for violating their probation.

The special operation marked the official launch of a new countywide program designed to prevent repeat drunken-driving offenders from doing it again.

Statistics show that repeat offenders are likely to keep re-offending, according to the state Department of Motor Vehicles.

“These are the people that say they just went down the street to get cigarettes and maybe a couple more beers, and there you have it, someone is injured or killed,” said county Probation Officer Gonzalo Mendez.

Mendez, a probation officer for 12 years, has experienced the tragic effects of drunken driving on a personal level.

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

And in March, a close relative was killed by a drunken driver in Clairemont. Mendez later learned that the driver had a previous drunken-driving record.

Mendez supervises the eight-officer unit in charge of the new program, which was created through a two-year, \$1.1 million state grant presented to the county last month.

With the new funds, Mendez is able to double his team and throw more resources at surprise enforcement details such as the one Thursday night.

The unit tracks 400 to 500 people throughout the county who have been convicted of DUI at least twice, making sure they are attending recovery classes and are abstaining completely from alcohol. It becomes a felony when someone is convicted of drunken driving a fourth time.

On Thursday night, the unit, with help from Escondido police officers, searched 20 homes for alcohol. Offenders who were home were given Breathalyzer tests.

Three were arrested; about 10 on the list weren't home.

One man who was home was doing exactly what he was supposed to be doing.

No alcohol was found in his system or his house. He proudly told the officers that he was 864 days sober and attending an Alcoholics Anonymous camping trip soon.

"That's really satisfying that people are taking their probation seriously," Mendez said. "It felt good uncuffing people and saying, 'Keep up the sobriety, keep up the good work.' "

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