

Aggressive DUI patrols clamp down on county

BY HANK SCHALLER, Of The Oakland Press
June 10, 2000

There are probably going to be a few more suspected drunken drivers cooling their heels in the Oakland County Jail this morning.

Those motorists most likely got caught in a law enforcement dragnet sometime between 10 p.m. Friday night and 4 a.m. today during the first of five special Operation Night Cap patrols in eight Oakland County communities this summer.

These special patrols are being conducted in Auburn Hills, Pontiac, Southfield, Rochester, Troy, Royal Oak, West Bloomfield Township and Waterford Township. "We want people to think about taking that one last drink before heading home," Waterford Township Police Chief John Dean told a press conference at Woody's Diner in Royal Oak Friday. "There's nothing wrong with responsible drinking," Dean said. "It's the irresponsible drinkers that we're after. During 1999, Oakland County had 1,885 alcohol-related crashes resulting in 39 deaths and 1,143 injuries, and even one death is one too many." Eileen Weisse, program coordinator for the Traffic Improvement Association of Oakland County, said on the nights of Operation Night Cap patrols, an additional 26 patrol cars will be out on the streets looking for drunks.

The overtime costs of the patrols being conducted by the Oakland County Sheriff's Department Alcohol Enforcement Team, Michigan State Police and Auburn Hills, Pontiac, Southfield and Waterford Township police will be covered by a \$20,000 grant from the Michigan Office of Highway Safety Planning. A \$4,000 grant from the Ashley Marie Easterbrook Fund will cover the overtime costs of additional patrols by Troy Police. Rochester, Royal Oak and West Bloomfield Township are picking up additional overtime costs out of their own budgets. Royal Oak Police Chief Mel Johnson said arresting drunken drivers has always been a priority for his department and he had no concerns about budgeting the money the program needed. A year ago, a much smaller Operation Night Cap program resulted in 90 drunken driving arrests over five nights of patrol, Weisse said.

"Hopefully, we are going to continue to make this program bigger every year until it includes the whole county," she said. "We just wish there was enough grant money available for every police department to participate." Oakland County Sheriff's Sgt. Gary Hall, head of the Alcohol Enforcement Team, said enforcement efforts like Operation Night Cap have made a big difference locally since 1980. "In 1980, when the Alcohol Enforcement Team was established, there were 900 lives lost in Michigan and 91 lives lost in Oakland County in alcohol-related accidents," Hall said. "Last year there were 39 lives lost here (Oakland County)."

Hall said the Alcohol Enforcement Team expects to make its 10,000th drunken driving arrest sometime later this year. "We figure these aggressive patrols have saved a lot of lives," he said. Troy resident David Easterbrook, whose daughter, Ashley, and two of her friends were killed by a drunken driver in 1997, said he knows programs like Operation Night Cap work.

"There will be less people murdered on our streets by drunken drivers as a result of this program, I'm convinced of that," said Easterbrook, who has become one of the most visible spokesmen for Mothers Against Drunk Drivers since his daughter's death.

Operation Night Cap patrols will also be conducted from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. on July 8, July 22, Aug. 12 and Sept. 15.

