For the first time in many years, alcohol fatalities in Clark County are up. We are part of a national trend. In Southern Nevada, alcohol related deaths are one-third higher than they were mid-September 2001. Nationally, last year posted the first increase in alcohol fatalities since 1995.

Many think that we are beginning to back-slide and that greater attention needs to be paid to keeping drunk drivers off of our streets.

Every year 1.5 million drivers are arrested in the US for driving drunk. Yet, research shows that for every arrest there are 772 instances of drinking and driving. As a result, one in three Americans will be affected by this violent crime in their lifetime.

The key to protecting innocent victims from impaired drivers is taking a systematic approach that includes highly visible and coordinated efforts by law enforcement, prosecutors, courts, traffic safety organizations and community partners.

There are many opinions about what a safe level of alcohol is when you get behind the wheel of a car. Respected people in the community will tout anywhere from “none” to “anything less than the standard limit of .10.”

Did you know that...

The risk of a driver being killed in a crash at .08 BAC is at least 11 times that of drivers without alcohol in their system. At .10 BAC the risk is at least 29 times higher (Zador).

If every state passed a .08 BAC law, about 500 lives would be saved each year (Hingson, et al).

Although the outward appearances vary, virtually all drivers are substantially impaired at .08 BAC. Laboratory and on-road research shows that the vast major of drivers, even experienced drivers, are significantly impaired at .08 with regard to critical driving tasks such as braking, steering, lane changing, judgment and divided attention. (NHTSA).

While there is no "safe" amount of alcohol for drivers, most people can drink moderately and drive legally when the illegal per se limit is set at .08. A 170-pound male typically would have to consume more than four drinks in one hour on an empty stomach to reach a BAC of .08. A 137-pound female typically would have to consume three drinks in the same time frame. (NHTSA)
Yes, but does it work?

At least nine independent studies have been conducted, covering nearly all of the states that have enacted .08 BAC laws. These studies have consistently shown that .08 BAC laws are associated with reductions in alcohol-related fatalities, particularly in conjunction with administrative license revocation (ALR) laws, already in place in 40 states, including Nevada. (NHTSA 2001)

But what about the “serious” drunk driver?

EVERY drinking driver is serious, but we keep hearing that .08 won’t effect the alcoholic driver. If the research showing how many drinking drivers are on the road for every driver caught, is correct, that would mean that in Nevada last year there were more than one-million times that a driver on the road was drunk. They couldn’t all be alcoholics. The greatest dividends of .08 will be to the “casual” drinker because any tool that raises the educational opportunities for drivers will yield the biggest rewards. It is true that the majority of fatalities in NV that were alcohol related were at .10 or higher, there were lives lost, bodies mangled and lives irrevocably changed by drivers who would be described as casual drinkers.

What Cost Nevada?

In a study conducted for NHTSA in 1998, Nevada’s alcohol crashes were given a price tag. This study found that the average alcohol fatality in NV cost $3.7 million dollars:

- $1.3 million in monetary costs
- $2.4 million in quality of life losses

The estimated cost per injured survivor of an alcohol related crash averaged $92,000:

- $34,000 in monetary costs
- $58,000 in quality of life losses

Researchers looked at what crashes cost per mile traveled in Nevada, they found:

- non-drinking drivers have a $0.20 per mile cost
- drivers at .08 BAC have a $3.80 per mile cost
- those drivers with a BAC of .10 and above have a per mile cost of $8.80

Alcohol related crashes accounted for an estimated 10 percent of Nevada’s auto insurance payments. Reducing alcohol related crashes by 10 percent would save $30 million in claims payments and loss adjustment expenses.

Cost per drink? The local casino may have a .99 cent margarita special, but the true costs are hard to swallow: The societal costs of alcohol related crashes in NV averaged .80 cents per drink consumed. People other than the drinking driver paid .40 cents per drink, but they didn’t get a hangover!

Just how impaired is an .08 driver?

In a report that examined 112 studies on driving related behaviors and low BAC’s the consensus was:

At BAC’s of .05, 34 percent of the studies reported impairment.

At BAC’s of .08, 94 percent of the studies reported impairment.

They also found the level of impairment depended on the measure used. Some, like divided attention showed impairment as low as .01 BAC and others, like choice reaction time did not show impairment until BAC’s of .06 and above were reached. Some of the findings reported were: Divided Attention is sensitive to alcohol’s effect impairment begins at .05 Tracking impairment is found at BAC’s as low as .0018, and consistently at .05 Visual Functions, which include visual acuity, contrast sensitivity, and oculomotor control show impairment begins at BAC’s of .03 Reaction Time in its simple form is not effected by alcohol but Choice Reaction Time, where a person has several response possibilities, shows impairment at .06. The conclusion was that all driving related skills showed impairment at .07 BAC with the exception of simple reaction time. (Review of literature on the Effects of Low-Dose Alcohol on Driving Skills)