DUI problem in Ascension under attack

By TIM TALLEY
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GONZALES — Mothers Against Drunk Driving had almost 1,000 reasons when it formed a new chapter in Ascension Parish this summer, according to the group's organizer.

That’s how many people that city, parish and state law enforcement authorities arrested for driving while intoxicated in the parish in 1983, according to chapter organizer and President Peggy Kober of Gonzales.

The new MADD chapter has taken on Ascension's DUI problem with a vengeance since the chapter was sanctioned by the national anti-drunked driving organization. And the group's message is attracting a lot of attention.

"More and more I get calls from people who want to know more," Mrs. Kober said. "We’re not against drinking. We’re against driving and drinking."

MADD’s principal goal is to stop DUI-related injuries and deaths. There were eight such deaths in Ascension in 1983, she said.

"We’re not saying criminalize the drunk driver. We’re just saying keep him off the road. He’s going to hurt somebody very badly," she said.

Education and vigorous enforcement of Louisiana's new DUI laws are what’s needed to lower Ascension's high volume of drunk drivers, according to Mrs. Kober.

“We have to educate the public. People need to be made aware of what the consequences are. I’m hoping that people become aware of us more and more," she said.

Mrs. Kober’s involvement with MADD began early this year. She said she became curious about Louisiana's DUI laws and contacted Baton Rouge's MADD chapter when a neighbor with numerous DUI arrests was in an alcohol-related accident in which a woman was injured.

The neighbor had been prosecuted for the previous DWIs but received light sentences, she said.

"We have taken some giant steps in our parish in the past year since the new laws took effect," Mrs. Kober said. But putting an end to drunken driving will take more than tough laws, she said.

"It’s a lack of education and generation after generation after generation of not adhering to the laws," according to Mrs. Kober.

MADD encourages crackdowns by authorities on retail liquor establishments that sell alcohol to minors.

However, some problems, such as overcrowded jail facilities, will take time and money to resolve, she said.

"If you have someone swaying down the highway, and there’s no room in the jail, then they just keep swaying down the highway," Mrs. Kober said.

MADD supports alternative educational and public service programs for the first-time DWI offender who may not have a drinking problem, but jail sentences should be mandatory for the repeat offender, Mrs. Kober said.

"My biggest concern is the multiple offender. They make me fighting mad," she said.

"If he comes in again he belongs in jail. I don’t think that jail will solve the problem. They need to be educated. But they also need to be punished for their actions," Mrs. Kober said.

"If he still chooses to drink and drive, then get him away. For the sake of himself and others, get him off the streets," she said.

She said MADD encourages crackdowns by authorities on retail liquor establishments that sell alcohol to minors.

MADD has produced a series of educational programs on drinking for adults and school-age children, Mrs. Kober said.

"It’s a big party area. At any social gathering, no matter what it is, there is booze," she said.

Ascension's MADD chapter has been generally well received by law enforcement and judicial officials in the parish. Mrs. Kober said her organization is working with the officials to assure that all DWI charges are prosecuted and sentenced.

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"If you have someone swaying down the highway, and there’s no room in the jail, then they just keep swaying down the highway," Mrs. Kober said.

"The possibility exists that the next DWI accident may happen because there was no room in the jail. I think it’s a damn shame."

Recent court-authorized changes in the parish’s alcohol education program for DWI offenders have concerned MADD members, she said.

The parish’s former program, the Ascension Alcohol Driver Education Program, was replaced in October by the Louisiana Driver Improvement Program, a program required of DWI probationers by court systems in several parishes in the Baton Rouge area.

Mrs. Kober said she observed a one-day, six-hour LDIP class of DWI offenders on Nov. 3 in Gonzales at the request of Ascension Parish Court Judge Pegram Mire. The new court-approved program appears to be less effective than the AADEP program, she said.

In a letter to Mire, Mrs. Kober said LDIP instructors appear to be competent, but portions of the scheduled program were omitted and class participants "were not made aware of the seriousness of their DWI offense."

"I have no personal relationships involving the Ascension Alcohol Driver Education Program, but that program far outweighs (the) Louisiana Driver Improvement Program," Mrs. Kober’s letter states.

"During my four nights at AADEP, I observed absolutely no misconduct from students, an outstanding rapport between instructors and students, an honest interest in the information being presented (and) comments made by students proving their intake of the information," Mrs. Kober says.

Mrs. Kober said AADEP was replaced apparently because its four nightly classes were inconvenient for DWI offenders and because of its cost. AADEP classes cost DWI offenders $100 while the LDIP classes cost only $36, she said.