By ADRIAN ANGELETTE
Advocate staff writer

Louisiana will join most states early Tuesday when a new law goes into effect that lowers the level at which a driver is considered drunk.

At 12:01 a.m. Tuesday, drivers will be considered to be driving drunk when their blood-alcohol level reaches .08. The previous level was .10.

Backers of the measure say they are “thrilled” with the change.

Law enforcement officials warn that many drivers could be legally impaired and not realize it.

East Baton Rouge Parish sheriff’s Col. Mike Barnett said he doesn’t expect the new standard will create jail overcrowding problems because most people booked with driving while intoxicated make bail before being assigned to a cell.

But drivers need to be more aware of how much alcohol they consume so they don’t get booked in the first place, he said.

“You don’t have to drink very much to get to .08,” Barnett said. “If you have three glasses of wine with supper, it’s highly likely you will exceed the new threshold.”

The Sheriff’s Office expects a few more bookings, but most people arrested for drunken driving have blood-alcohol levels much higher than the minimum, he said.

“Most of the people we book are pretty drunk,” he said. “We’re not going to have a huge crush of people going to jail.”

Col. Terry Landry, superintendent of State Police, said troopers will “aggressively enforce” the new DWI limit.

“You have to be honest with yourself about your ability to move about or operate a motor vehicle,” Landry said. “You can tell when things are not how they are supposed to be.”

The law should help save lives on Louisiana highways, he said.

During the year that ended Aug. 31, state police arrested 10,190 people suspected of operating a vehicle while intoxicated. Troopers investigated 518 fatal crashes on Louisiana highways and estimate that 48 percent were alcohol related.

The change is welcome, but late, said Cathy Childers, executive director of the Louisiana chapter of Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

The Legislature passed the change in 2001 but put off the date in 2003.

The Advocate
Baton Rouge, LA Date: 9-29-03
Sec: A
Pg: 1
Column: 2

VERTICAL FILE
Drinking and Driving
Motor Vehicle Drivin