RESPONSE TO LIGHTNER

State, Local Efforts Eyed To Fight Drunk Driving

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Drunk drivers kill 70 people nationwide each day and some state and local officials are looking for ways to combat the problem.

The responses came Wednesday following a visit from Candy Lightner, founder and national spokeswoman of Mothers Against Drunk Drivers. Mrs. Lightner expressed some frustration following a meeting with state and local officials.

Mayor Bud Lasteraptes told Mrs. Lightner that "we're going to respond to the problems you mentioned." She was referring to a need for stiffer penalties for drunk driving convictions and a public awareness to the problem.

"The attention given the person charged with the crime often overshadows the victim," he said.

Lasteraptes said the city will soon launch a program to battle drunk driving and the Lafayette Alcohol Traffic Action Program, better known as LATAP, will be re-implemented.

LATAP, a pilot "OWI" countermeasure program developed by the Louisiana Highway Safety Commission through City Court, was ended in 1979. It was originally designed to help reduce the impact of traffic accidents by focusing on the drinking driver.

During the four years the LATAP program was administered, a 7.4 percent decrease in alcohol-related injury crashes and a 10.5 percent decrease in alcohol-related traffic accidents were recorded.

Lasteraptes said he has also met recently with representatives of the Louisiana Highway Safety Commission, which is funding the 15-member state task force.

Gov. Dave Treen announced Tuesday a local task force, with special emphasis on drunk driving, will coincide with the state's and should be underway within three months, Lasteraptes said.

Steve Young of the LHSC said a number of local police will sit on the task force.

"It will be a small, active squad in capturing the right information for conviction of drunk drivers, knowing the right days and the right hours these people are most active," he said. "We need to at least have a perception of the problem. There's a serious risk in drinking and driving."

The risks are increasing at a rapid rate, in Lafayette as well as all of Louisiana, Young added.

"The concern is obvious in this city. It's a problem area, but I believe with the help of the mayor, the city council and chief of police, an effective program can be put together," he said. "It's our hope to reduce the fatality and injury rate statewide."

But getting drunk drivers off the streets doesn't end the problem, said Troop 1 commander Louis Ackal.

"A person may be guilty of drunk driving, but he's set free by attorneys finding technicalities in his case. The courts have no alternative but to go along with the attorneys. And this is the case for everything from drunk driving to murder cases," Ackal said. "It's a sad thing when a person is arrested and can't be incarcerated."

Ackal added that Treen's task force is a step in the right direction.

"The concept is good," he said. "It depends on the results and how they're used."