Louisiana among top 16 states in fight against drunken drivers

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LAFAYETTE — Mothers Against Drunk Driving has given Louisiana a grade of B, ranking it among the top 16 states in the nation, in the national fight against drunken drivers.

The state's high rating was announced Tuesday by MADD and the GuideOne Foundation, an anti-drunk-driving organization founded by GuideOne Insurance.

The report card evaluated performance in key alcohol-related safety areas that include prevention, legislative leadership and law enforcement. Louisiana's grade was announced during a 9 a.m. press conference at the state Capitol.

Louisiana was graded above the C+ national average. The state was also credited for establishing stiffer penalties for high blood-alcohol levels, graduated driver's license and zero tolerance in improving its grade from a C- in 1996, when the survey was last conducted.

Cathy Childers, state executive director of MADD, said efforts to prevent underage drinking and DWI laws have been strengthened in recent years.

"This is by no means a signal to ease up on our efforts," Childers said. "We're proud of our improvement, but there is still a long way to go."

The release of the report from the Rating the States survey comes on the eve of Thanks-

giving, one of the most heavily traveled holidays.

Last year, about 250 people died in alcohol-related deaths during the Thanksgiving holiday.

In Louisiana, of the 922 traffic deaths last year, 426 were alcohol-related. Nearly 16,000 people were killed and more than 1 million injured in crashes involving alcohol nationwide.

Col. Jim Champagne, executive director of the Louisiana Highway Safety Commission, said a lot of agencies deserve credit in helping Louisiana turn the corner.

Several of the agencies present at the press conference included State Police, state alcohol and tobacco control and the state office for addictive disorders.

Champagne said that passage of stiffer legislation against repeat DWI offenders and a statewide open-container law could help push the state toward an A grade. Champagne said he would continue to support legislation to bring the blood-alcohol level for drunken driving to .08 from its present .10.

"I believe that is a good piece of legislation," he said. "We owe it to the people of this state to get drunk drivers off the road. People at .08 should not be on the road."

MADD criticized in its report the Senate Judiciary C Committee, which considers alcohol-related matters, for defeating anti-DWI legislation. However, the report also praised the state for legislating increased penalties for drunken drivers.

Still, the report suggested that if a blood alcohol of .08 had been passed during the 1999 legislative session, the state would have received an A in legislation. Instead, the state received a B+ in the legislation category.

Sen. Max Jordan, R-Lafayette, chairman of the Senate Judiciary C Committee, said the criticism from the report was unwarranted. He said the state's going from an overall C- in 1996 to a B shows that the committee has done a good job.

"It sounds like they didn't get everything they wanted and they're still complaining," he said.

Jordan said that the Senate actually approved a .08 law earli-
er this year, but it was defeated in the House. He said people testing at .08 haven't been the problem on Louisiana's roads.

"(The Legislature) made penalties stiffer for those who test over .15," he said. "They are the ones presenting the danger on the highways."

MADD also suggested in its report that Louisiana could improve its grade with a statewide open-container law. Local municipalities can choose to adopt an open-container ordinance.

Jordan said that he didn't think Louisiana would ever pass a law covering the entire state because of the cultural significance.

"Louisiana is a state that attracts a lot of tourists," he said. "There is some festival in some small town every week in Louisiana."

Louisiana's overall B grade was bolstered by two A grades in political leadership from the governor and in youth legislation, prevention and education.

Only California (A), Florida (A-), North Carolina (A-), Utah (A-) and Illinois (B+) graded higher overall than Louisiana.

Neighboring states Arkansas and Mississippi both received a B-, while Texas received a grade of C.

Childers said the grades aren't meant to compare states.

"It examines the progress that's been made and the challenges that remain to combat drunk driving," she said.