Stricter drunk-driving laws save lives, says MADD head

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If the criminal justice system were stricter with drunk drivers, 20,000 more people would be alive today, the national president of Mothers Against Drunk Drivers said here Saturday.

Drunken-driving legislation adopted by some states has helped reduce the number of deaths attributed to impaired drivers from 25,000 in 1984 to 22,360 last year, Norma Phillips said during a banquet at the Sheraton Hotel. She estimated that 1,140 people were saved last year by such legislation.

Members of the local MADD, Students Against Drunk Drivers and Just Say No chapters released 1,140 balloons Saturday in commemoration of those lives saved through stricter laws. The balloon launch and banquet kicked off observances of National Drunk and Drugged Driver Awareness Week.

Randie Krogel, president of MADD’s Baton Rouge chapter, said 67 of those lives were saved in Louisiana by the combined efforts of many groups that are addressing public awareness through drunk-driving campaigns.

While the official number of deaths has decreased, Phillips said the number of alcohol-related deaths is probably higher than statistics show because only 25 percent of those involved in accidents is tested by police to determine whether they have been drinking.

“What is the bottom line? We’ve only begun to scratch the surface,” she said.

Phillips said several judges have told her they are afraid they would not be re-elected if they were stricter with drunk drivers.

“They are afraid to do what they have to do because they are afraid of losing their jobs,” Phillips said.

It’s infuriating to see drunken drivers sentenced to no more than a few years in prison, said Phillips, who believes that the 15-year penalty of second-degree murder should apply to vehicular homicide charges.

She said she knows of such injustices in the judicial system firsthand.

Her son, Dean, and his girlfriend were killed on Thanksgiving Day in 1981 by a drunken driver.

The front of his pickup truck was smashed back so far that there was only seven inches between the windshield and the back of the cab. In the back of the truck was a birthday gift that her son’s girlfriend had planned to give to her mother later that day.

“Losing a child is a number-one tragedy. A part of you dies with that child. I lost my grandchildren,” Phillips said. “There is always an empty chair. We never get over it.”

After repeated court continuances, the man who killed the couple was sentenced to serve two years with five years’ probation, which Phillips said was grossly unfair.

“He served a year of that sentence. My son was sentenced to death,” she said.

Phillips, disillusioned by the criminal justice system she described as one with “very little justice and not much system,” said hers and other people’s experiences pointed out the need for stricter legislation.

“Drunk driving is no accident. It’s a senseless tragedy that kills more than homicides,” Phillips said.

When criminal justice officials blame the lenient treatment of drunken drivers to crowded jails, Phillips told MADD members to respond:

“There is no more room in the cemeteries.”

Laws such as the one that would raise Louisiana’s minimum drinking age would help reduce the number of teenage drinking-related deaths by 1,200,

Phillips said.

The state Legislature is considering raising the drinking age from 18 to 21. Federal law requires the 50 states to enforce a 21-year-old minimum drinking age or lose 5 percent of their federal highway construction funds this year and twice as much next year.

Stiffer penalties for first-offense drunken drivers also would help further reduce the number of alcohol-related deaths, Phillips said.

“We at MADD know that one drink can impair,” she said and added that many people arrested for the first time had driven home drunk countless times before.

Phillips urged MADD to recruit more volunteers to help with the organization’s prevention efforts.

“Don’t wait until that fateful day when a loved one is killed by a drunken driver.” she said.